DIGITAL DEVIL STORY
AM
JuJu
女神転生
デジタル・デビル・ストーリー
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Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei

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Preface

Three years ago, I promised an American reader that I would translate “Megami Tensei” into English myself. In order to fulfill that promise, I am publishing this translation.

However, since contractual matters were resolved this month, my partner and I are in discussions with an overseas publisher regarding the translation. My translation is not polished enough as English. But it is faithful to the original text. I hope it will help a translator I trust understand my Japanese. And I believe that translator will turn the sequels to “Megami Tensei”—“Warrior of the Demon City” and “The End of Reincarnation”—into wonderful English novels.

Therefore, I will remove this text by the end of July. In the meantime, I hope you will take the time to savor what “Digital Devil Story” is all about.

Editor’s Note: This edition was preserved from the author’s Note blog

Prologue

1

It was the mid-1980s.

In that era, most Japanese people were unaware of the existence of the internet. Only a select few knew how to connect computers using telephone lines.

In Kunitachi City, in the suburbs of Tokyo, there was a private school called Jussei Academy.

One day, as if he couldn't wait for class to end, a tall, muscular student burst into the classroom of Class 3-C.

"Are you Nakajima?"

The tall student stepped closer to the desk of Akemi Nakajima—a boy who stood out due to his handsome features—and loomed over him menacingly.

"Yeah, I am…"

Nakajima fought hard to suppress the trembling of his body. He pushed himself up from his desk with both hands and faced the tall student.

The tall student was Hiroyuki Kondo, captain of the karate club and the de facto boss of Jussei Academy.

A few students had already been forced to transfer through violent means simply for defying him.

But Nakajima had never been involved with Kondo, nor did he recall doing anything to incur his wrath.

(What on earth did I do?)

Nakajima swallowed hard and tried to open his parched lips. At that

moment, a chuckle came from behind him.

Turning, he saw a female student with a charm beyond that of a typical high schooler. Her eyes, cat-like and captivating, yet filled with malice, were fixed on Nakajima.

She was Kyoko Takamizawa, a classmate of his.

In that instant, Nakajima understood everything.

“Wait!”

The moment he cried out, a fist slammed into his solar plexus.

Unable to even scream, Nakajima collapsed to the floor. Kondo kicked him without hesitation.

He delivered two kicks to Nakajima’s lower abdomen, then two more to his chest.A Kicks that inflicted damage, yet were controlled to keep him conscious.

Afraid to get involved, the classmates left the classroom one by one.

“Listen to me…”

The pointed toe of a shoe was shoved into Nakajima’s mouth as he desperately tried to protest. His tears and saliva mixed together, dripping onto the floor.

“Don’t make excuses. I gotta teach you what happens if you touch my girlfriend.”

Kondo kicked Nakajima in the back, forcing him to crawl on the floor. Then Kyoko, who had been watching his torment with amusement, crouched down and flicked his upper lip with her finger.

“This guy has a face like a girl, yet he tried to kiss me.”

“That’s a lie…”

In reality, it was Kyoko who had tried to kiss him, and Nakajima had simply pushed her away. Because it wounded her pride, Kyoko had incited Kondo—who was infatuated with her—as revenge.

But there was not a single friend who would speak up for Nakajima.

Only his classmate, Kenichi Takai, wearing black-rimmed glasses, looked at Nakajima with a worried expression, unsure what to do. He didn't seem to have the courage to stop Kondo.

Kondo effortlessly dragged Nakajima up by his left arm and punched him again in the solar plexus. Nakajima tried to scream through the gut-wrenching pain. But his diaphragm was paralyzed. He couldn't draw in or expel air. Only a faint groan escaped his bruised lips.

For Nakajima, who disliked hurting others or being hurt himself and had always lived his own way, being beaten like this was a first. Moreover, the reason was fabricated by the girl he'd dumped. Pain, rage, and humiliation surged through his entire body, as if blood were trickling from his emotional scars.

Kyoko stared at him with excited eyes and laughed. Her shrill, hysterical voice echoed throughout the classroom, piercing his eardrums, awakening and inflaming an unknown emotion dormant deep within Nakajima's heart.

(Damn it. I won't forgive you!)

A savage light, one he had never shown to anyone before, ignited in Nakajima's eyes.

"What's with that look?"

Kondo momentarily flinched at the intensity of his gaze. Then, he punched Nakajima's cheek, as if provoked by his own reaction. A tooth snapped with a sharp crack.

"That's it, please give him a break," Kyoko said, trying to placate him.

If Kondo hurt Nakajima any more, she might be held responsible herself. It was the voice of a shallow woman, calmly thinking of her own self-preservation.

"Oh, she forgives you. Still, you're too weak. Not even worth the effort."

Kondo twisted his lips into a sneer and flung Nakajima's tattered body onto the floor.

About an hour later, he had recovered from his injury enough to walk again. Supported by his classmate Kenichi Takai, he made his way to Kunitachi Station on the JR Chuo Line.

"Let's sit down."

Supporting Nakajima as they boarded the train, Takai gestured with his square jaw toward two empty seats side by side.

“Huh… yes.”

Nakajima slumped into the seat, yet still stared resolutely ahead, secretly regretting his decision to enroll in this high school.

Jussei Academy was known as an elite institution that sent over twenty students to the University of Tokyo each year.

However, those who know the inner workings of the school question its extreme policy of dividing students into two distinct tiers. Facilities, curriculum, teaching materials—the select class is blessed with everything, while the rest of the students are given only ordinary equipment and a standard curriculum.

The select class students, comprising less than twenty percent of the entire student body, become the target of envy from the ordinary students.

At Jussei Academy, school violence occasionally occurs due to that envy. It might be unavoidable under such a two-tier policy.

Both Nakajima and Takai were in that select class.

Slender Nakajima, if he swapped his stiff-collared school uniform for a schoolgirl’s, could easily pass as a beautiful girl.

Takai’s appearance was a stark contrast to Nakajima’s. He had a sturdy build and thick fingers, honed from practicing judo in middle school. However, he wasn’t assertive, and removing his black-rimmed glasses revealed a boyish face.

“Kondo was insane today, huh?”

He probably felt guilty about not being able to do anything for Nakajima. He said it as if to make an excuse.

“That idiot just doubles his energy when girls are around.”

Nakajima replied dismissively, raising one eyebrow.

“Oh, come on. Why is someone like Kyoko even in the select class? And I can’t believe you hit on her.”

“Actually, it’s the other way around.”

“What? Kyoko hit on you and got rejected?”

Takai nodded, looking satisfied.

Many female students harbored feelings for Nakajima, but none had yet captured his heart.

Takai thought of Nakajima as being far too picky.

While the two fell silent, the train departed Musashisakai Station.

Takai glanced at Nakajima’s profile.

Taking everything into consideration, Nakajima didn’t get particularly good grades within the select class.

Compared to Takai, who consistently excelled across all subjects, Nakajima’s aptitude was clearly confined to math and science.

The only humanities subject he could get good results in was World History.

His athletic ability wasn’t anything special either.

However, as far as computer knowledge was concerned, no one in the school —including the teachers—could match him.

All the computer games Nakajima created were simply fascinating.

After playing Nakajima’s games, even the most popular ones seemed trite.

In the CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction) room, Nakajima’s expression as he stared at the computer screen and ran his fingers over the keyboard was the definition of cool.

(If I’m a talented student, Nakajima is a typical genius.)

Takai nodded and shifted his gaze to the view outside the window. Just then —

“A devil…”

Nakajima muttered under his breath.

“What?”

“Ah… never mind.”

“Just now, you—”

Just as Takai opened his mouth to reply, the train arrived at Nishi-Ogikubo Station.

“See you.”

Nakajima descended the stairs at the station with a deeply serious expression.

(Honestly, I can’t understand what he’s thinking.)

Takai shrugged his shoulders and plopped down into the seat again.

2

The path behind the shopping district.

Several newly built apartment buildings stood side by side. Nakajima walked with his head down, muttering under his breath. To passersby, he might have looked like a high school student engrossed in memorizing English vocabulary. However, those who caught his words turned back in puzzlement. His mutterings sounded like creepy spells—something that didn’t suit a high school student at all.

A cherry branch protruding from the top of a concrete wall brushed his cheek. Nakajima didn’t seem to mind, continuing to walk with his eyes fixed on the ground.

His gaze finally lifted when he stood before a prominent high-rise apartment building.

He inserted the key into the lock of the main entrance. The door slid open with a stately sound. Stepping inside, Nakajima took a deep breath and straightened his back.

He entered the elevator and pressed the button for the thirteenth floor.

The change in air pressure made his whole body ache, reminding him of that unpleasant incident.

A copper nameplate embossed with “NAKAJIMA” was affixed to the door of Room 1302.

He pressed the doorbell, but there was no response.

With a sigh, Nakajima unlocked the door, carelessly kicked off his shoes, and headed straight to the bathroom.

The face reflected in the mirror was not a pretty sight. His split lip had swollen, and a faint yellow bruise had appeared on his left cheek.

After staring at his reflection for a moment, Nakajima abruptly turned the faucet on full blast. He cupped his hands to catch the water and splashed it onto his face as if slapping himself.

Returning to the living room, he collapsed onto the sofa and noticed a note on the side table.

“I’ll be late getting home due to a meeting. Microwave your dinner—”

Before reading to the end, Nakajima crumpled the paper in his hand.

“If you’re going to write the same thing every day, why don’t you just make a copy?”

Ever since his father, who worked for a trading company, was transferred to Los Angeles, his mother seemed to become passionate about her design work.

Lately, it wasn’t unusual for her to come home late at night.

The moment he recalled his mother’s face, his smoldering anger flared up again.

At that moment, the phone rang. It was probably a call for his mother anyway.

Glancing sideways at the ringing phone, Nakajima retreated to his room.

It was a bare room with not a single poster on the walls.

Three walls, excluding the window, were mostly filled with steel bookshelves reaching to the ceiling. While manga magazines and comics took up a large portion of the shelves, which is typical for a high schooler, there was one corner that gave off a strangely dark impression.

Books on magic and wizardry lined the shelves. The Book of the Dead and The Pnakotic Manuscripts could be seen among them.

A fully equipped computer sat on the steel desk, and beside it lay an introductory text on magic, The New Theory of the Golden Dawn.

Judging from the worn leather spine, it had been read over and over.

Nakajima pulled out his chair and sat down in front of the PC.

He flicked the wall switch, and David Coverdale's haunting vocals began to stream from the speakers.

Nakajima's fingers danced across the keyboard.

——LIST

As he entered the command, lines of a massive program scrolled down the screen.

Following the program list with his sharp eyes, Nakajima began typing with a flowing rhythm.

Nakajima became interested in magic when he happened to read The New Theory of the Golden Dawn.

Though the clumsy translation irritated him, he read the book to the end because the alluring world of magic, hiding a secret sense of guilt, was expressed with a strange sense of reality.

Around that time, solar eclipses were attracting people's attention in Japan and were being featured in computer magazines. While analyzing a BASIC program predicting solar eclipses, the program's flowchart seemed to overlap with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life depicted in The New Theory of the Golden Dawn. This experience made a strong impression on him.

"Come to think of it, there was a discussion on American BBSs about the similarities between computer theory and the theory of magic. Could it be true?"

Just imagining the process of practicing magic—adding various conditional branches to a chart based on the Tree of Life—made his heart beat fast. Eventually, his curiosity turned toward devil summoning, the very core of magic.

If Nakajima had focused solely on programming, his fantasies might have remained just that. However, he was able to access overseas BBSs using an acoustic coupler, thanks to the influence of his father, a trading company employee stationed in Los Angeles. In an era when Japan was considered backward in PC communications, he was one in ten thousand high school students capable of such a feat.

Since Nakajima wasn't particularly fluent in English, he navigated overseas magic sites one after another, armed with an English-Japanese dictionary. There, he discovered that Professor Charles Fead of MIT, renowned for his work in AI, had long been interested in the parallels between computer theory and magic. Nakajima learned that if he joined the ISG (International Satanist Garden), which the professor oversaw, he might be allowed to receive instruction from him.

Nakajima promptly applied for membership. Although his English was far from perfect, the professor was impressed by his sharp intelligence and accepted him. However, because the professor was extremely busy, daily interactions were handled by the ISG's artificial intelligence. This AI gave Nakajima the following advice:

Magic is the act of creating a "box" to hold desired outcomes.

You should study astrology and master the laws of planetary motion. To assist with this, the ISG provides specialized astrology software.

Even with AI assistance, learning magic and astrology independently was no easy task. Yet, Nakajima intuitively grasped the connection between the two. After a year of building his skills, he continued developing a devil-summoning program while enthusiastically studying The New Golden Dawn.

Nakajima was proficient in FORTRAN, a highly difficult language, as well as the cutting-edge C language of the time. Yet, he preferred to build his frameworks in BASIC, embedding machine language routines to boost processing speed. Perhaps his thought process was simply best suited to BASIC.

The programming was nearing completion.

He had mostly finished the part to summon a devil.

It had taken an almost overwhelming amount of trial and error to reach this stage, but now only one subroutine remained to be written. In that subroutine, he planned to call and manifest a devil into his PC.

However, until yesterday, Nakajima had hesitated about whether he should actually run the program once it was complete. For Nakajima, creating the program to summon a devil was the ultimate goal. But he had not considered what to do with a devil once it was summoned.

But today's event gave him a simple and clear purpose.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to be my guinea pigs. By the way, when Pluto and the Moon overlap in the virtual horoscope, I should display the sacrifices’ data. I understand that, but what’s the meaning of the spell ‘Yod Daur Set’ we’re supposed to chant then?”

Nakajima picked up the modem phone, dialed into ISG’s host computer in Massachusetts, and explained the situation via chat to an AI named Craft, asking about the spell.

As Nakajima’s explanation was vague, a series of question marks appeared on the computer screen repeatedly.

——OK, I understand.

Craft finally seemed to grasp the situation. Then came the reply.

——It’s a time meter, probably. You don’t have to use that kind of spell.

Nakajima was secretly disappointed. He ended the communication with Craft and plunged back into creating the subroutine.

About two hours later, a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in.”

Nakajima responded curtly, his eyes fixed on the program list on the computer screen.

The knob turned, and his mother entered, wearing her outdoor clothes.

“Did you eat dinner properly?”

“……”

Nakajima offered no reply, continuing to type on the keyboard.

“Akemi, what happened to your lip?”

His mother, now right behind him, looked into his face and asked.

“I accidentally bumped into a soccer goalpost.”

Nakajima stopped typing and glanced back at his mother. She was a beautiful woman with a slender face, much like her son. People often mistook them for siblings when they were together.

However, she was conservative about her son's education and wanted him to get into a prestigious medical school, even though Nakajima's grades were not good enough.

"Did you hurt yourself? Should I bring some disinfectant?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing serious, Mom."

Irritated at being interrupted while programming, Nakajima tapped the keyboard randomly. It made a beeping sound, and an error message appeared on the screen.

Seeing there was nothing she could do, his mother left the room, looking half-resigned.

3:00 AM.

"Alright, I did it!" he exclaimed. He slapped his knees with both hands and stood up from his chair.

——RUN

The disk started to spin, and strange characters flickered on the screen. But less than five minutes later, the computer screen froze, showing an error message.

——Out of memory.

Did it mean the program was too large? No, it was more likely that digitizing the summoned devil required more memory than anticipated.

"Got it. I'll be able to solve this problem using the host computer of the school."

Nakajima's eyes gleamed brightly.

3

It was seven o'clock on Saturday evening of that week.

On that night, Mr. Iida, a teacher at this school, was on night shift duty. Noticing there was someone in the CAI room with the lights off, he opened the door.

“Who’s there at this time of night?”

When he called out, a student operating a PC looked up.

The light from the computer screen made the student’s face glow eerily.

“Oh, it’s you, Nakajima. Why didn’t you turn on the lights?”

Iida’s tone softened.

Nakajima’s grades were inconsistent, but his science and math teachers trusted him as a gifted student.

“The program didn’t work as expected. But I’m making the correction. It will be done soon.”

Nakajima’s voice sounded metallic, as if it were synchronized with the whirring of the disk drive.

“It’s good you’re enthusiastic, but you know you need permission to use this room at night, don’t you?”

Iida turned on the lights as he grumbled. The moment the room lit up, he let out a shriek of horror.

“What the hell is this?!”

Centered around the chair where Nakajima sat, the entire floor was covered in geometric patterns drawn with red and white chalk.

“It’s Solomon’s Hexagram.”

“Solomon’s Hexagram? What on earth are you talking about!? That’s the occult.”

Ignoring Iida’s sarcasm, Nakajima slid his fingers over the computer keyboard.

Soon, in the machine room beyond the glass partition, the host computer began to operate.

“Alright, I finally fixed the bug. It’s complete.”

Typing in a command to print out the program, he stood up and faced Iida.

His almond-shaped eyes—which could have been described as those of a

beautiful girl—now held a demonic smile.

He had a cut on his lip from when Kondo punched him. It had been closed until just now, but due to his excitement, the wound reopened, fresh blood seeping out and forming a thread down his jaw.

“Explain, Nakajima. What program were you creating, using the school’s computers without permission?”

Iida’s gaze turned stern.

“I was creating a program to summon a devil. This hexagram is for protection against it. The devil will descend soon. You’d better come inside, Sensei. I won’t take responsibility if you are ripped to pieces.”

Nakajima brushed his bangs from his forehead and said it jokingly.

Of course, Nakajima also thought that the possibility of a devil with a physical body appearing immediately was extremely low. The hexagram was merely a decoration to enjoy this intellectual adventure.

For a moment, Iida was stunned. Then, he stared at Nakajima.

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Which of us is the crazy one? Look, sensei, this cut on my lip, this bruise on my face. Kondo, a member of the karate club, did this to me. It was the same for Kyoko Takamizawa. Our school and teachers let mad dogs like them run wild without taking any countermeasures. No matter what happens to me in the classroom, teachers and students pretend not to notice. Though it’s obvious that I’ve been a victim of violence, our school never punishes them.

You teachers are probably just waiting for them to graduate. The troublemakers will go away in a year or two. But my high school life will never come again. I won’t let them have their way any longer. I’ll summon a devil and get revenge on that human scum.”

Nakajima seemed to get excited as he spoke, his shoulders heaving with ragged breaths.

Ignoring Iida, who stood there in a daze, Nakajima slowly turned toward the keyboard.

——RUN

The screen displayed the final command, and the host computer’s magnetic

tape began to move little by little.

Iida tried to browbeat Nakajima, but a cold breeze flowing in from somewhere clung to his body, raising goosebumps on his upper arms.

“Trying to summon a devil with a computer… How the hell did you come up with such a ridiculous thing?”

Trying to hide that he was scared, Iida forced a twisted smile.

“Computer theory actually shares many similarities with magical theory. Magic involves first creating a structural model of the world, then dividing the changes that occur within it into constant and variable elements. After that, we find the elements that we need to achieve our goals, connect them, and produce a result. This resembles a certain kind of programming. Devil summoning is transferring a devil existing in a different realm into this world, and computers are perfectly suited for this task.”

Nakajima was intoxicated by his own words.

Meanwhile, the cold air clung to Iida’s body like a living thing, and an indescribable odor invaded his nostrils.

The lights flickered, and the CAI room was enveloped in darkness.

Only the whirring sound of the disk drive echoed.

Soon, the computer emitted a low, muffled growl.

“Yod, heh, vau, heh.”

To Iida’s ears, that growl sounded like words with some meaning.

Nakajima muttered something in a low voice, matching the rhythm of the growl, and continued to input commands at an unbelievable speed.

Suddenly, the room shook violently like an earthquake, and a window cracked.

At the crucial moment, Nakajima typed in the final command.

——KILL! Hiroyuki Kondo, Kyoko Takamizawa.

Iida didn’t like students like Hiroyuki Kondo and Kyoko Takamizawa. He hated them. But more than that, he felt an instinctive dislike toward Nakajima’s methods.

“Stop being stupid. If you want, I can thoroughly investigate the incident and suspend Kondo from school. Just stop it.”

In the shaking room, Iida was stumbling but desperately reached for the PC’s power switch.

Nakajima wouldn’t let that happen. He pinned Iida’s arm down with a strength unimaginable from his usual self.

But as the two wrestled, the rumbling faded away.

The fluorescent lights flickered several times and came on, and the cold clinging to Iida’s body vanished without a trace.

“Where did you go? Why won’t you show yourself? Oh, Devil! Are you abandoning me?”

Nakajima shouted and turned back to the keyboard.

——KILL! KILL!

But the host computer mercilessly stopped the magnetic tape from spinning.

Nakajima was flustered, opening the program list and checking its details with bloodshot eyes. Before long, as if his spirit had been completely drained, he stood up, staggering.

“The summoning program is perfect. The devil was right there, yet he vanished. Does even this host computer lack the power to summon the devil…”

Holding the program list under his arm, Nakajima left the CAI room with the unsteady gait of a sleepwalker.

Iida, who had been gazing at Nakajima’s retreating figure, finally snapped back to reality and turned off the computer.

“The more intelligent, the more prone to madness. Even so, that earthquake was alarming.”

Iida muttered, as if trying to forget the dreadful memory.

4

The following week, Iida was teaching math in the CAI room. It was the class with Akemi Nakajima and Kyoko Takamizawa.

Perhaps irritated because Iida had witnessed his failed devil summoning, Nakajima shot him a challenging glare.

This was something unthinkable from his former self.

Iida did his best to ignore Nakajima and proceeded with the lesson.

“You’ll now take an interactive test with the host computer. Although I call it a test, it won’t affect your grades. Through this interaction, I want you to identify your own weak points. Now, when I give the signal, enter the command into your PC.”

Following Iida’s instructions, the students simultaneously began tapping their keyboards.

No one looked away from their screens, silently solving the problems. The host computer displayed their progress on the teacher’s monitor in real time.

(If CAI becomes widespread, teaching will get so much easier. However, if it becomes too widespread, the time may come when teachers are no longer needed.)

He was watching the students and feeling at ease. Then,

“Yod, heh, vau, heh.”

Suddenly, a low, muffled voice, as if echoing from the depths of the earth, shook the CAI room.

The host computer’s magnetic tape began spinning at a tremendous speed, and the computer screens changed at a dizzying pace.

Spooky colors and bizarre shapes ran together, with what looked like hieroglyphs occasionally appearing and then vanishing.

The students stared at the screens as if fascinated, without uttering a single sound.

“Nakajima! You did it, didn’t you? This is inexcusable!”

Just as Iida tried to rush angrily toward Nakajima, a student in the front row stuck out his foot. Iida tripped over it and fell flat on his face.

Before he could push himself up, two students rode on his back and pinned his arms behind him.

“What are you doing? Stop it!”

Shocked by this unexpected rebellion, Iida screamed and struggled to lift his head. But none of the students were looking at him.

They had risen from their seats, staring straight ahead with unfocused eyes like sleepwalkers.

Moments later, three male students exited the classroom, while the remaining students slowly encircled Kyoko Takamizawa.

Kyoko, the blood completely drained from her face, could only stare blankly as her classmates closed in around her.

Terror filled her cat-like eyes, and her lips quivered so violently that she couldn’t even cry out.

But the moment a male student wearing thick glasses touched her shoulder, Kyoko sprang onto the desk as if freed from a spell.

“Stay away, you bastards!”

Clutching razor blades between her fingers, Kyoko screamed in a high-pitched voice.

“Stop it, Takamizawa! Run!” Iida’s trembling voice echoed through the classroom.

But Kyoko glanced down at the teacher, who was being held down to the floor, spat, and slashed the razor at the boy who had touched her.

The boy’s glasses flew off, his cheek split open, and fresh blood spurted out.

Yet far from flinching, he didn’t even wipe away the blood, persistently grabbing Kyoko’s right ankle.

“Let go!”

The razor blade snapped after slicing the boy’s temple and plunging into his arm.

Another male student overpowered Kyoko and seized her ankle. Immediately, the two boys dragged her down and lifted both of her legs with all their

strength, holding Kyoko upside down. Kyoko flailed her arms like a trapped animal, her hair flying wildly as she struggled.

Beside her, Miyuki Kano—said to be the most beautiful girl in their grade—watched coldly.

“Miyuki, is that you? Did you do this ! ”

Kyoko screamed, but Miyuki merely shook her head as if to say, “No, I didn’t.” Taking that as a signal, the surrounding students crouched down and began to strangle Kyoko.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Iida cried out, sobbing.

Then a cold voice said, “Teacher, it’s too late now.”

Nakajima, who had been typing commands into the PC, looked at Iida with an ironic smile.

“Ugh…”

Kyoko let out a painful groan as her legs convulsed.

When Miyuki turned her face away, the students who had been holding Kyoko upside down let go as though nothing had happened. Leaving Kyoko’s body on the floor, the circle of students began to disperse.

At that moment, the door opened, and the three male students who had left the classroom earlier returned, bringing Kondo with them.

Kondo had rushed to show off his power to the elite students of the select class after hearing that Kyoko was being criticized and berated by her classmates.

But the classroom was deathly quiet, a scene quite different from what he had imagined. Three male students beckoned the bewildered Kondo to the center of the CAI room, then stepped back.

“Bloody hell!?”

Kondo saw Kyoko lying on the floor, not moving an inch. He was so shocked that he could do nothing for a moment. While his attention was distracted, the students closed in around him, cutting off his escape route.

At that point, Kondo could have escaped. But he was so overcome with shock and rage that he lost control of himself.

“Who done it?!”

Kondo trembled with rage, his bloodshot eyes glaring at the students.

But the timid students who would normally sneak away just by being glared at by him showed no fear. Instead, they glared back at him.

Something was fundamentally wrong.

Then, a groan sounded.

Turning toward the groan, he saw Nakajima stomping on Iida’s face, who was pinned to the floor.

“Nakajima…?”

Kondo was taken aback. It had never crossed his mind that this slender, beautiful boy could commit such an outrageous act.

“Kondo, run! Everyone’s gone mad.”

Iida screamed from deep within his throat.

Snapping back to reality at the scream, Kondo let out a beastly roar and lunged at Nakajima.

But a dozen or so students simultaneously pounced on Kondo, dragging him to the floor before he could reach Nakajima.

Kondo shook off the students with all his strength and got up, punching down those who grabbed at him.

Though some students had their foreheads cracked and were covered in blood, and others had broken ribs, they rose, seemingly feeling no pain, and attacked Kondo with expressionless faces.

One of them lifted a PC monitor up and smashed it into the back of Kondo’s head.

The impact made Kondo’s vision blur and his legs buckle. At that moment, the students dragged Kondo back to the floor and pinned him down, holding his limbs firmly.

“Damn it, let go! I’ll kill you!”

Looking down on Kondo, who was resisting and trying to shake off the hands

holding him, Nakajima wore a cold smile on his handsome face.

“You’re the one who’s going to be killed. You probably wanted Kyoko to kill you, but as anyone can see, she’s already gone. You should be grateful I asked Miyuki to do it for you.”

Nakajima jerked his chin, and Miyuki knelt beside Kondo with a knife in her hand, bringing her face close to him.

Her faint, warm breath brushed Kondo’s cheek.

The moment Kondo trembled, she raised the knife. The blade gleamed in the fluorescent light, and then she swung it down.

Simultaneously, Kondo’s throat gaped open, blood gushing forth like a bursting dam. A hissing scream erupted from his severed windpipe.

Kondo stopped breathing with his eyes wide open.

“Now then, sensei.”

Nakajima squatted down, peering into Iida’s face.

“Did you see that? My devil-summoning experiment wasn’t a failure, was it? That day, the devil did appear. However, it just returned to its world before we could confirm its existence. When we used the CAI room during yesterday’s class, a message from the devil arrived: ‘KILL! I UNDERSTOOD.’

He can’t get out of the computer into our real world, which is why he manipulates the students through something like mass hypnosis to grant my wishes. By the way, sensei, I promised the devil that I would give him three souls. Kyoko, Kondo, and the third one is—”

For an instant, an emotion resembling pity flashed deep in Nakajima’s eyes.

But as if suppressing it, Nakajima closed his lips tightly and stood up.

“W-wait…”

Toward Iida, gasping and struggling desperately, a group of about ten students approached slowly.

Chapter One: The Night of the Devil

1

On a June morning, the sun showed its face for the first time in a while. Puddles were glistening like mirrors. Yumiko Shirasagi narrowed her eyes slightly, gazing absently at the three-story school building beyond the wet playground.

Yumiko Shirasagi's name means "white heron."

Her slender, gracefully elongated limbs matched her name.

Additionally, her curious, reddish-brown eyes and well-defined nose marked her as a true beauty. Yet, her playful, endearing charm seemed to fascinate people even more.

Until just two weeks ago, she had lived in Sapporo, 800 kilometers north of Tokyo. However, her father, who had been managing the Sapporo branch of a major electronics manufacturer, was promoted and assigned to work at the Tokyo headquarters.

Though she was happy about her father's promotion, she had an important university entrance exam next spring.

So, even if she ended up living alone, Yumiko had wanted to stay in Sapporo and attend the same high school as her close friends.

Still, after much hesitation, Yumiko decided to go to Tokyo with her family because her mother had persuaded her, saying, "Having your father work alone in Tokyo is out of the question. And we can't possibly let you live alone either. We have to be together as a family."

But by the second day after transferring to Jussei Academy, Yumiko was already beginning to regret her easy compromise.

"I don't like this atmosphere."

Yumiko's scores on the transfer exam showed she had the ability to rank among the top students even in Jussei Academy's select class.

Her parents were relieved and pleased, thinking that Yumiko seemed likely to be admitted to her desired university. Yet, Yumiko felt that this school had an unnatural, indescribable coldness to it.

Her high school in Sapporo had been a well-known school, but there hadn't been this kind of discrimination such as select and regular classes. More than anything, each student had enjoyed their high school life more freely and unrestrainedly.

In contrast, watching the students at Jussei Academy, she could even sense a kind of resignation, almost like that of old people. The select class students simply went through the motions, like machines, following the curriculum meticulously designed for entrance exams.

Although there were some capable students in regular classes, the fact that they were treated differently from the select class had completely sapped their motivation. It seemed to her that everyone knew their assigned role and made no effort to break out of it.

Come to think of it, yesterday, except during her self-introduction, she hadn't spoken a single word.

For Yumiko, who had enjoyed a happy high school life with her friends in Sapporo, it was an unbearable situation.

However, it wasn't as if they harbored any hostility toward her.

The entire class was strangely silent, awkward as if weighed down by some invisible pressure.

Even during breaks, not a single classmate spoke to Yumiko.

"If the male students fawn over me too much, I'd be in trouble if the other female students got jealous."

A few days ago, Yumiko had joked, making her mother laugh. But her pride was deeply wounded now.

The schoolyard echoed with the ringing of the bell.

Yumiko gathered her composure, took a deep breath, and slowly began walking toward the school building.

The first period was classical Japanese literature class.

Ms. Ohara, the teacher in charge, is quite beautiful.

Due to her profession, she avoids heavy makeup, but she has a striking face and figure that would easily pass as a model, even from a female's perspective.

However, her teaching style—which involved reading the original text in a monotone voice and simply translating it into modern Japanese—was anything but engaging. Yumiko had been desperately fighting back yawns for a while now.

"There is a tanka in the Tales of Ise: "Suruga-naru , Utsu no yamabe no utsutsu nimo yume nimo hito ni awanu nari keri.". The meaning of this tanka is "I've come near Mount Utsu in the Suruga region, but I can't meet you, neither in reality nor in dreams, and I am sad. This tanka has appeared three times on the K University entrance exam and once on the W University exam, so you must memorize it…"

Ohara completely ignored the literary meaning of the tanka and started talking about entrance exams.

(She never tells us how romantic the Tales of Ise really is. This is just too bad for the protagonist, Ariwara no Narihira…)

When she was getting thoroughly fed up with the class and on the verge of succumbing to sleepiness, Yumiko noticed a rhythmic sound like someone tapping a plastic board behind her.

Gently turning her head, she saw a handsome male student sitting diagonally behind her. Resting his handheld computer on the desk, he was tapping the keys fluently.

She remembered his name was Akemi Nakajima.

Yesterday, the other students had introduced themselves to her. However, she couldn't match their faces with their names. Since Nakajima pretended not to notice her and had not introduced himself, the homeroom teacher told her his name. He had a handsome face and a name like a female student's, which was the reason he left an impression.

(He is working on something else during class. He's got guts.)

Yumiko felt a slight sense of familiarity toward this classmate.

(He doesn't seem to be playing a game… Is he writing his own programs?)

At that moment Nakajima took a breath, straightening his back and lifting his face.

His eyes turned toward her, and by chance, his gaze locked perfectly with Yumiko's.

The success of the devil summoning experiment seemed to have fundamentally altered Nakajima's humanity.

Or perhaps the sealed demonic nature had revived in his brain, completely consuming the Nakajima that had existed until now.

The beautiful face that had been nothing but a symbol of timidity just two months ago now radiated an intense ego accompanied by an aura.

But what startled Yumiko when she exchanged glances with Nakajima wasn't just his dazzling presence.

Déjà vu, a sense of having seen this before.

(I didn't notice yesterday, but I feel like I've met this person somewhere before. It feels like it could have been a long time ago. No, why is that?)

A strange torrent of emotions surged through Yumiko's body.

Nakajima showed no interest in Yumiko staring intently at him, resuming his monotonous tapping on the keys.

A sense of loss, like peering into a deep valley, gripped Yumiko. And then,

"Miss Shirasagi, what are you looking at?"

Ohara's voice, laced with irritation, snapped Yumiko back to reality.

Lifting her head, she saw the tanka written in white chalk on the blackboard, covered with various annotations in red and yellow chalk.

"Explain what the Utsu in this tanka refers to."

Yumiko felt the gazes of her classmates turn toward her.

Only the sound of Nakajima's keyboard tapping continued, monotonous yet without hesitation.

“Yes. It’s a poetic double entendre. Utsu has two meanings. One is the place name ‘Utsu’ and the other is utsutsu, meaning reality.”

Yumiko’s voice was slightly strained. But for Yumiko, who aspired to study Japanese literature, Ohara’s question was not difficult.

“You’re well-studied, Miss Shirasagi. But the teacher’s lectures should be helpful sometimes too.”

Though her caution carried a hint of sarcasm, Ohara’s expression softened.

The momentary tension dissolved, and as if drawn in by Ohara’s smile, the male students let out a laugh.

Somehow, Yumiko felt as though the entire class were mocking her.

The bell signaling the end of class rang.

“Sensei, just a moment.”

Nakajima called out to the teacher just as she was about to leave the classroom.

Ohara turned around, clear agitation in her eyes.

(Is the teacher afraid of Nakajima-kun?)

Yumiko noticed the unexpected relationship between the two.

“Sensei, you’ll come tonight as planned, right?”

Nakajima didn’t stand up from his seat. He spoke while tapping the keys of his handheld computer.

Then, Ohara’s face flushed.

“I understand. The CAI room…”

Ohara replied in a hoarse voice.

Nakajima smiled and nodded, then waved lightly.

Yumiko, who had been staring at them, felt as if Nakajima’s actions were telling the teacher, “That’s enough, you may go.”

However, her classmates showed no sign of noticing this strange interaction between teacher and student. They calmly prepared for the next class.

Unable to suppress her curiosity, Yumiko waited for Ohara to leave the classroom and stood directly in front of Nakajima's desk.

"Hey, Nakajima-kun."

Even though Yumiko wasn't quite sure what to say herself, she called out.

Nakajima looked up, puzzled.

The moment those eyes, hiding a devilish charm, fixed on her, a powerful sense of déjà vu seized Yumiko once more.

(I feel like I've met you somewhere before. But why?)

That was what Yumiko truly wanted to ask, but posing such a question would surely leave the other person at a loss.

How should she explain it? Yumiko was bewildered by this unfamiliar emotion.

"You, you're…"

As Yumiko struggled to find the words, Nakajima narrowed his eyes as if teasing a child and spoke.

"I think it's best for you, don't get too involved with me."

He said coldly.

"No, it's not that. I…"

After saying that, Yumiko realized she hadn't prepared her next words.

From the back seat, a burly male student was gesturing for her to stop."

The chime sounded, and the murmur instantly died down. The second-period physics teacher had already taken the podium.

(If you ignore me, that's fine. Wanting to know you is my own business.)

Returning to her seat, Yumiko bit her lower lip with her slender, well-shaped front teeth, suppressing the urge to vent her frustration from deep within.

2

At seven in the evening, Yumiko was peering at the CAI room from behind the school building.

A lukewarm breeze blew, and small flying insects swarmed around her.

The full moon peeked through a break in the clouds, casting a faint glow over the entire single-story annex housing the CAI room.

(What a fool I am, playing detective during my senior year.)

Watching the silent CAI room, Yumiko smiled wryly.

Why was she doing this? It was a no-brainer. Nakajima had definitely said “tonight” .

What on earth did he intend to do by summoning Ohara to the CAI room at night?

It also seemed to be something extremely important to Ohara.

Yumiko recalled Ohara’s unsteady steps as she left the classroom.

However, whatever Nakajima would do with that female teacher, it should be none of Yumiko’s business.

(Did I fall for him at first sight or something? No way!)

She had to admit Nakajima possessed a unique charm.

Yet Yumiko tried to convince herself she was strongly drawn to him on a level separate from liking or disliking him.

When the clock struck nine, someone crossed the connecting corridor and entered the CAI room.

Yumiko stiffened with tension.

Soon, lights came on in the CAI room, and the silhouettes of several people moving about were reflected on the windowpane.

But before Yumiko could let her heart race, a big man’s shadow approached the window, and in an instant, all the blinds were lowered.

It seemed that Ohara and Nakajima weren’t the only ones gathering here tonight. What on earth were they planning to do, meeting at this hour? Unable to suppress her curiosity, Yumiko decided to circle around from

behind the school building toward the CAI room.

Just after Yumiko left her hiding spot, Ohara quietly opened the door to the CAI room and swiftly slipped inside.

The room was brightly lit, and three students welcomed her.

They were clad in black hooded cloaks. One reverently held a silver platter, while the other two carried a sword and a candlestick.

The desks where the PCs had been during the day had been removed, replaced by a leather-upholstered sofa.

Akemi Nakajima sat there, closed his eyes, and seemed deep in thought.

With the sofa at its center, a circle divided into twelve equal sections like a horoscope was drawn on the floor. Within the circle, astrological symbols representing the Moon, Sun, Mars, and Pluto were drawn at four points.

“Hello, welcome.”

Nakajima noticed Ohara entering and slowly stood up. His movement revealed belts attached to the backrest, armrests, and foot of the sofa, designed to restrain the body.

Even upon seeing this, Ohara showed no sign of fear. Instead, her expression softened.

Nakajima smiled and nodded, then ordered the three students to turn off the lights and light the candles on the candlestick.

The students blindly obeyed his commands.

Soon, as if overcome by the mysterious atmosphere of the room shrouded in darkness, Ohara knelt before Nakajima.

Nakajima’s white, slender hand touched Ohara’s flushed cheek.

“Please, relax even more. In just a few more minutes, the devil Loki will descend. Loki is a devil known for cunning and beauty—truly fitting for you, my teacher…”

Nakajima’s voice had a deep, sweet resonance that seemed to melt the heart.

As Nakajima’s hand slowly moved from her cheek to the nape of her neck, Ohara’s breathing grew increasingly ragged.

“Now, let’s get the host computer up and running. Please don’t worry. If the devil were to meet you, he would undoubtedly be captivated.”

Nakajima whispered into Ohara’s ear, then stepped away from her to input a command into the terminal.

Beyond the glass, a magnetic tape began to slowly rotate.

Next, Nakajima picked up a handheld computer and entered a short command.

Soon, a white mist-like substance rose from the LCD screen, gradually swelling before vanishing outside the door. Immediately after, a low, visceral beastly roar, the kind that shakes our insides, echoed through the connecting corridor.

It was a devil called Cerberus, summoned and materialized by Nakajima to guard tonight’s ritual.

Meanwhile, the three students guided Ohara to the sofa and secured her limbs and chest with belts.

“Now, steady your breathing. Please focus your mind and summon the devil.”

Click. Click.

The terminal’s disk drive made a sound, as if urging them on.

“The Moon and Mars are in opposition. The Sun and Pluto are also in opposition. Then, in the heavens, a Grand Cross has formed. There is no better night for summoning the devil.”

Nakajima said, as if chanting a spell.

Then he retrieved something resembling a helmet from the machine room and placed it on Ohara’s head.

It was a brainwave modem helmet. It was developed in the United States. It’s an interface that converts human brainwaves into digital signals, enabling direct communication with computers.

Two cables, one red and the other black, extended from the back of her head. The red one was connected to the host, while the black one was linked to the terminal PC.

As Nakajima entered the command, the magnetic tape began spinning

furiously.

Her body was already trembling slightly, as if her consciousness had begun to interact with something within the host computer. A pungent, musk-like odor drifted from nowhere, clinging to her body.

The faces of the three students watching the ritual with unfocused eyes showed expressions of awe.

“Yod heh vau heh”

The moment the low, muffled voice echoed from the machine room, Ohara let out a scream and arched her back.

Her eyes, staring into the void, were wide with terror, and intermittent, strained cries continued.

As if trying to escape something, every time Ohara twisted her limbs, the sofa’s legs lifted off the floor, and cables writhed.

Her wrists, bound by leather straps, were chafed and bleeding, the seeping blood staining the straps a deep, dark crimson.

But gradually, the panic subsided. Her expression softened, and Ohara closed her eyes.

Blood still flowed from her bitten-through lip, yet a faint smile touched her mouth.

“Loki, it seems that you have succeeded in making Ohara your own. What do you intend to do with this woman now?”

Ohara’s thoughts and sensations, digitized through the brainwave modem helmet, should now be guided into the image world that Loki created within the host computer.

The pain she felt a moment ago was likely a kind of rejection reaction, triggered when her digitized nerves touched the devil’s nervous system.

Nakajima looked at the screen connected to the brainwave modem helmet, trying to see the mental world captured by Ohara’s optic nerves.

Suddenly, the roar of Cerberus thundered from the direction of the connecting corridor outside the door.

A burly student holding a sword aloft responded to Nakajima’s glance and

headed for the door.

We need to rewind time a little.

Some time passed after Ohara entered the CAI room. Yumiko had circled around to the covered walkway from the back of the school building.

Relying on the moonlight reflecting off the linoleum floor, she moved cautiously.

Through the slats of the blinds on the darkened window, a small light flickered faintly. Was someone burning a candle?

(Yumiko! Stop this! Go home quickly, take a shower, and forget all about it!)

Her usual self-pleaded urgently.

But tonight, another self-existed within her body.

(What are you afraid of? Isn't this your chance to see Nakajima's true nature?)

Yumiko, as any girl her age would, obeyed that voice.

From the CAI room came a sound like someone sobbing or like someone screaming far away.

Just as her heart pounded so hard it felt like it would burst from her chest, without warning, something suddenly crawled out of the darkness before her.

The moon breaking through the clouds revealed the form of the terrifying beast.

Its body was larger than a lion's body, and she saw from its enormous mouth sharp fangs growing in double rows.

Eyes that glared at Yumiko glowed like flames, and metal antennae sprouting from both sides of its ears twitched as if determined not to miss even the slightest change in its surroundings.

Its powerful, broad-shouldered torso bore tiger-like stripes, and scales covered the tail, which was like a giant serpent.

It was the devil-beast, Cerberus.

Breathing its foul, raw breath upon the frozen Yumiko, the beast roared.

A shockwave that was like spear piercing her body struck Yumiko. She felt the world before her eyes swaying, and unable to withstand the shock, she lost consciousness.

An unnatural heat and the intermittent gasps echoing close by snapped Yumiko back to consciousness.

The surroundings were dim, and she felt a cold sensation against the cheek she'd been forced onto the floor with.

(Oh, I wonder what happened to that monster?)

Yumiko sat up with a start. And she saw Ohara, bound to a leather chair.

She had something like a helmet placed over her head, and she was moaning.

Beside her, Nakajima stared at a screen, a cold smile playing on his eerily handsome face.

"Nakajima-kun!"

As she let out a cry that suddenly, someone seized her right shoulder from behind.

Turning around, Yumiko gasped, her voice caught in her throat.

It was her classmate, Takai. Normally, he was a rather timid and rational guy, but now he had a vacant look in his eyes, as if possessed by something. It was impossible to believe he was aware of his situation, or that Yumiko was there.

Moreover, besides him, two other students stood motionless, wearing black hooded cloaks, their eyes equally vacant.

At that moment, Ohara's moan grew louder than ever.

Twisting violently as she continued to pant, Ohara was so lewd it was unbearable to look upon, radiating an aura so demonic that merely being near her felt like it would defile one's soul.

"What the hell is this? What did you do to Sensei?"

The cry burst from her mouth involuntarily.

Just as Takai tried to pin Yumiko down, Nakajima raised one hand to stop him.

Takai's hand moved awkwardly, releasing Yumiko's shoulder.

"Yumiko Shirasagi… right? Come over here. You'll see something interesting."

Standing up at Nakajima's words, Yumiko noticed her skirt's hem was torn in one spot, as if it had been bitten by a dog. Only then did Yumiko realize that the beast had truly been there.

Nakajima pointed to the computer screen connected by a cable extending from Ohara's helmet.

The screen showed a bronze statue of a dignified young man, like a Greek sculpture.

No, it couldn't be a sculpture.

Divinely beautiful, the image was moving gently, as if imbued with life.

A close-up of the young man's upper body, from his face to his chest, appeared.

His expression held a wisdom beyond human reach, and his jet-black eyes evoked the image of a black hole, swallowing everything it gazed upon.

"It's the devil Loki."

Nakajima's voice came from right next to her ear.

"This is CG, right?"

Yumiko's eyes remained glued to the screen.

"If someone could draw such a realistic devil with imagination, that'd be impressive. But this is a real devil. Well, I suppose it's only natural you wouldn't believe it."

The screen revealed Loki's muscular chest. His chest, gleaming black, was completely covered in scales.

Suddenly, Yumiko noticed that Ohara's moan was perfectly synchronized with Loki's movements.

The next moment, realizing what this meant, Yumiko gasped.

"Exactly. Ms. Ohara is having a good time in bed with Loki right now. In her

fantasy world.”

Nakajima spat out the words.

Ohara was now nearing a climax.

Through her unbuttoned blouse, her sweat-glistening chest could be seen pulsing.

She was accepting a devil who cannot physically exist, born from the world of imagination.

At that moment, Yumiko noticed a faint blue mist drifting around Ohara’s chest.

Moreover, the mist gradually thickened, simultaneously there was an unbearable stench.

For some reason, Nakajima was flustered and crouched down beside Ohara. Then, he operated a handheld computer with one hand while bringing the rod-shaped sensor closer to the mist.

Soon, Ohara screamed and lost consciousness, and the blue mist gradually faded away.

Nakajima let out a sigh.

In his expression, Yumiko sensed his confidence wavering.

“I succeeded in summoning a devil using a computer.”

Nakajima suddenly uttered words that Yumiko could never believe.

“It’s not that surprising. Magic is fundamentally a science with a meticulous logical structure. However, devil summoning experiments require simulating combinations of tens of thousands of data. They were so complex that even a single person couldn’t test them all in a lifetime.

That’s why only a very few people—those who had continued secret research for generations or were blessed with miraculous luck—could make contact with devils. But the vast simulations that would be almost impossible for most humans are not a big deal for a computer. I’ve completed a program to summon devils from their realms.”

Nakajima’s tone was matter-of-fact.

While Yumiko listened intently to Nakajima's story, the CAI room was completely tidied up, making it hard to believe this was the same place where an ominous ritual had been held just moments ago.

Takai and the others, who had carried out the unconscious Ohara, were nowhere to be seen. Only Nakajima and Yumiko were standing there, facing each other under the bright lights.

After the bizarre ritual ended, Nakajima, left alone with Yumiko, looked like an ordinary seventeen-year-old high school student.

Even after such an unbelievable experience, while Yumiko was gazing at his side profile, she still found it hard to believe what he was saying.

"The program was perfect. Honestly, I don't understand the structure of what have been called devil's realms since ancient times. Maybe there's another world similar to Earth. Or maybe there's a multidimensional universe where multiple worlds overlap. Either way, the devil summoning program calls them from that world into this one.

However, we can't predict which devil will appear. I've tried various simulations, but Cerberus, who startled you, is currently the devil most compatible with my program. He responded even to the simplified program on a handheld computer and materialized on his own.

But the higher the level of a devil, the more data processing is required. With a great devil like Loki, even using the host computer's full capacity here only allows summoning him digitally within the computer.

Still, for me, being able to summon Loki is huge. Through the computer screen, Loki can put humans into a kind of hypnotic state. And he commanded everyone to follow me. That's why there is nobody in this high school who can defy me. Students, teachers—everyone respects me from the bottom of their hearts. It's almost embarrassing. The only price I should pay is offering sacrifices to Loki. And even that, as you just saw, is merely an event within the digital virtual world…"

As if he'd forgotten Yumiko was even there, Nakajima spoke into the air.

Yet, contrary to his words, a question was surfacing in Nakajima's mind.

(What was that mist a while ago? And that smell… No way, it couldn't be.)

If a true magician had been there, he might have mocked Nakajima's inexperience. He was a genius of ideas, but he had only learned magic from

books and the ISG's artificial intelligence. While the AI was advanced for its time, it likely didn't cover even ten percent of the world's magical knowledge.

If Nakajima had been a true magician, he would have known how crucial it was to establish a contract specifying purpose and duration the moment he summoned the devil.

But Nakajima had neglected this.

When Loki transformed Kondo and the others into bloody lumps of flesh, Nakajima was caught in the illusion that he had become the master.

Loki's power was immense.

Both students and teachers had respect for Nakajima implanted deep within their subconscious minds. Males obeyed him, and females fawned over him.

For a high school student who had never possessed any power before, it seemed like the ultimate pleasure.

Loki demanded a female as a sacrifice.

Through the brainwave modem helmet, the female who was united with Loki in the virtual world moaned, writhed, and eventually reached climax.

But Nakajima considered it, after all, just something that happened in a virtual world.

Loki could not escape the computer because he did not appear in physical form, but as a kind of AI.

But was that really certain?

What exactly was that blue mist clinging to Ohara's body…

As he was pondering, Yumiko's voice could be heard.

"Nakajima-kun, you're afraid of something, aren't you?"

Nakajima remembered he had been speaking to Yumiko.

(What am I doing? I'm talking a bunch of nonsense.)

Nakajima looked straight at Yumiko.

Just then, her eyes seemed to glow crimson, and in an instant, everything vanished from Nakajima's field of vision.

And suddenly, an unfamiliar, fantastical world spread out before his eyes.

Barren, rust-colored mountains stood towering toward the sky. A narrow path wound its way through the rugged peaks, stretching endlessly into the distance.

The young man, breathing fire-hot breath through clenched teeth, ran desperately along that path.

He wore a hemp robe with frayed hems, his long hair reaching to his chest tied back at the nape of his neck. Every time he kicked the ground, the magatama ornament hanging around his neck swung wildly. His appearance was like that of an ancient person from a mythical world.

Yet the face was unmistakably that of Nakajima Akemi.

Sweat spurted forth, smearing the dust caked on his cheeks.

"My beloved, why do you abandon me? Izanagi, why…" A sorrowful voice, heavy with despair, reached the young man's ears.

He unintentionally stopped.

He found himself trying to look back without thinking.

But he bit his lip hard, glared ahead, and started running again.

The woman chasing him dragged her bloodied foot, wounded by rocks, as she ran.

Her long, white, elegant arms thrust forward desperately, as if trying to close the distance to the young man.

Her black hair fluttered in the wind, flowing behind her with her frenzied cry.

But the face revealed beneath that hair was rotting and melting, its eye sockets gaping open.

Maggots wriggled between bone and flesh. As the woman gasped, a tear-like flesh juice dripped from her cheeks.

Her lips had fallen off, and she gnashed her white teeth, letting out a shrill

scream.

Then, a purple lightning bolt streaked across the gloomy, overcast sky and struck a nearby rock. From within emerged an eerie creature.

A giant woman, tall enough to pierce the clouds, with slimy, green, glowing skin and a hideous, frog-like face.

She spread her arms wide, blocking the young man's path as she loomed before him.

"Yomotsu-Shikome, get out of the way!"

The young man shouted.

"Stay where you are."

The woman wriggled her short, green neck, emitting a chillingly unpleasant voice.

As the young man resolutely pressed forward, the Yomotsu-Shikome took a step toward him.

Her thick and ugly foot struck the ground with a thud, causing the earth to tremble.

The young man seemed to feel no fear. He glared fiercely at the Yomotsu-Shikome's body, larger even than a giant elephant.

He pulled the red comb from his hair, snapped off one of its teeth, and hurled it at her.

The tooth pierced the woman's bare chest. Suddenly, her hideous face contorted in agony.

As if a deadly poison began spreading through her body, she clawed at her chest, retching up slimy stomach fluid and gasping.

Even then, she tried to lunge at the young man, but her body convulsed violently. With a thud that shook the earth, she collapsed face-down onto the rock.

As the young man cautiously darted beside her body, a sorrowful voice like the clinking of bells reached his ears once more.

"Wait, Izanagi…"

Yumiko stared at Nakajima, who stood frozen in a daze, consumed by an indescribable unease. Of course, witnessing such an unreal ritual made it impossible to remain calm.

But what Yumiko felt at that moment was a different kind of anxiety, mixed with irritation.

Nakajima's theory of devil summoning was uniquely brilliant, unparalleled in its genius. Yet Nakajima lacked the understanding of devil realms and devils that formed the foundation of this advanced theory.

Yumiko sensed this intuitively.

"Nakajima-kun, what's wrong?!"

Nakajima snapped back to reality at the sound of his name. He found Yumiko peering intently at his face.

Her eyes were frightened, yet filled with concern for him.

(What on earth happened? Could that illusion just now be related to the devil summoning program? Or…?)

For a moment, Nakajima was drawn into Yumiko's gaze.

But his pride, which was far too high, wouldn't let him open his heart to her any further.

"Just go already."

He said gruffly, as if he were trying to cover something up.

Yumiko seemed like she wanted to say something, but she didn't dare defy him and obediently complied.

Nakajima stood completely still, not moving a muscle, until her figure disappeared behind the door.

"Anyway, I have to determine what that mist really is."

After muttering that, Nakajima pulled himself together, called up the ISG host computer.

—Hallo, Nakajima, what happened ?

After checking the message from AI Craft, Nakajima activated another

computer. It was an automatic translation device equipped with a database of fifty thousand magical terms. While incomparable to modern translation software, it was revolutionary for its time.

——An unidentified mist-like substance has appeared on the sacrifice. I am sending the data collected by the sensors. Analyze it.

The data stored in the handheld computer was transmitted via telephone lines to Massachusetts.

One minute… two minutes. Nakajima tapped his desk impatiently.

Five minutes later, Craft finally sent the analysis results.

——The weight per unit volume of that gas is five times that of normal ectoplasm. Judging from the appearance conditions, the probability that the gas belongs to Loki is high.

——I used the full capabilities of the CAI computer to summon Loki as an artificial intelligence. Under these conditions, Loki should be unable to materialize!

——Based on the data you sent, I cannot give a definitive answer. However, if Loki is an artificial intelligence possessing superior intelligence, I cannot rule out the possibility that it discovered a method of materialization on its own.

——Thank you, CRAFT .

Nakajima sent the closing message and cut the line.

(There's no way Loki could find a way to materialize on its own. But regardless, it seems I'll need to work on developing new technology to keep Loki under my control.)

Nakajima muttered to himself as he walked to the window and glared at the cloud-covered, dark sky.

Chapter Two: Metamorphosis

1

4-Chome, Marunouchi, Tokyo. Midnight.

Buildings with their lights extinguished loomed darkly.

Not a soul walked the ginkgo-lined sidewalk. Moths drawn to the streetlights fluttered about, scattering their scales. The occasional thud of a moth hitting the metal poles of the streetlights was audible, such was the silence enveloping the office district.

Yet, such quiet seemed to have nothing to do with the major trading companies driving Japan's economy.

Even now, lights blazed brightly on the twelfth floor of the Mitsune Bussan Building.

That was the Export Division, responsible for trade with Europe.

It was certain that the full import restrictions of the EC would be implemented from August. Only two weeks remained until that month.

To seize the last chance for exports to the EC, the Export Division's staff had been working around the clock.

By this hour, everyone was getting tired. Some had flopped onto the sofa for a nap, while others had ventured out in search of ramen stalls around Tokyo Station.

Inoue, squinting his bloodshot eyes, was inputting the next day's shipping schedule into the workstation connected to overseas export hubs.

However, his usual dandyish appearance was ruined by the dust and fingerprints smudging his metal-framed glasses.

“How much longer will the input take?”

Hashiguchi, who was napping, half-sat up on the sofa and called out. His voice was weary, laced with a yawn.

“Just the home appliances for France left, so it shouldn’t take too long.”

Inoue unbuttoned his dress shirt and fanned his chest with the plastic sheet printed with global business partner codes.

“How much did shipments increase?”

Hashiguchi rubbed his puffy eyes and peered over Inoue’s shoulder at the screen.

“We’re definitely going to hit 200% year-on-year. I can’t get it off my mind thinking the cargo might get stopped at customs over there.”

“A little friction is unavoidable. Anyway, in two weeks, shipments will drop by 90% and we’ll be completely helpless.”

“But the section chiefs haven’t come back yet. How long are they going to take to eat ramen? Aren’t they having a drink?”

“Just take a break. I’ll cover the data entry.”

With a kind smile, Hashiguchi placed a hand on Inoue’s shoulder.

“Sorry, please do this for me.” Inoue replied.

Just as Inoue stood up and stretched, the modem phone rang. The LED lamp indicating data transfer from the Kunitachi branch was blinking.

“What could it be, at this hour?” Hashiguchi said.

“It’s probably a shipping request. If we have a surplus, they’ll ask us to send it to the Kunitachi branch. We’re swamped with exports right now, so we don’t have enough time for that.”

“Come on, the branch guys are working hard until this hour too.”

Hashiguchi calmed Inoue down, switched the disk drive, and set the computer to communication mode.

The string of numbers disappeared, and the screen turned green. Normally, the ID number indicating the sender’s section would appear here.

But then, the screen began showing meaningless shapes cycling through various colors.

“What the hell is this?”

Occasionally, unfamiliar characters flashed across the screen, but neither of them had any way of knowing they were ancient characters.

Soon, the screen showed a standing statue of a man.

“Knock it off. It’s the middle of the night.”

Inoue lit a cigarette, glaring at the screen with displeasure.

The cigarette’s smoke distracted them from noticing the musk scent that had begun to drift through the office.

Still, even as a prank, the statue was remarkably well-made.

Its body as perfectly proportioned as a Greek sculpture. Long, black hair. Lips a vivid rose color. And those jet-black eyes held an unfathomable, demonic allure.

“Wow!” Hashiguchi said. “This is some seriously high-level CG.”

“Is this CG? It looks just like a photograph.”

As Inoue leaned in to peer at the screen, a strange-smelling smoke drifted by.

“Oh, sorry.”

While Inoue was distracted putting out his cigarette, the man depicted on the screen flashed a smile and pointed at Hashiguchi. At the tip of that finger grew claws as sharp as a bird of prey’s.

This was an era when the concept of polygons was just beginning to take hold.

Hashiguchi was utterly captivated by the stunning CG—something that should have required a mainframe computer to render.

But before long, Hashiguchi noticed that the surface of the screen felt strangely damp and sticky.

As he tried to wipe the screen with his hand, he felt something cling to his fingertips and hesitated for a moment.

The slimy substance clung to his fingertips, and when he hurriedly pulled his hand back, a heavy, eerie, jelly-like mass was dragged out of the screen and splattered onto the floor.

“Ugh, what is this?!”

Inoue, who had turned around at Hashiguchi’s scream, stood there dumbfounded, overcome by a wave of shock.

Beneath the surface of that pink protoplasm, a network of green veins spread out, pulsing like the organs of a living being.

That hideous mass began approaching the two.

Inoue stepped back, tripped over a chair behind him, and fell. The impact made him throw up everything in his stomach.

“Inoue, pull yourself together!”

Hashiguchi grabbed Inoue’s arm to help him up, then tried to flee toward the door.

In the next instant, viscous tentacles rose from the jelly-like mass of flesh and coiled around their legs.

“Damn it!”

Hashiguchi screamed as he hurled files and the phone from his desk at the mass of flesh. Realizing it wouldn’t stop, he grabbed a chair and slammed it down on the creature.

But the gelatinous mass of flesh absorbed even the steel chair into its body, melting it away in no time.

Ba-dump, ba-dump…

Hashiguchi could not tell whether that sound was the beating of his own heart or the pulsing of the flesh.

When he came back to his sense, sensing a sinister presence at his feet, his right leg was already enveloped by the pink mass.

He tried to scream, but fear clamped down on his throat, and he couldn’t make a sound.

That pink mass began to devour Hashiguchi greedily, drawing his body into

its depths.

There was no pain.

A sense of endless loss, as if sinking into lukewarm mud, and a premonition of death spread through his body.

(Help me……)

He couldn't utter a sound, and when he reached out into the air with both hands, seeking rescue, the mass of flesh squeezed his torso with terrifying force.

In the blink of an eye, his ribs shattered and his internal organs burst. The vast amount of blood that gushed out was instantly absorbed by the mass.

Left alone on the deserted floor, Inoue couldn't believe what was happening.

Having lost all rational judgment, Inoue frantically stabbed at the red tentacles wrapped around his legs with a ballpoint pen. At that moment, he suddenly sensed someone's gaze and snapped back to his senses.

Then he noticed that eyeballs had formed on the gelatinous mass of flesh.

Eyes filled with evil and relentless malice were staring intently at him.

Soon, the tentacles began to crawl slowly up his legs toward his torso.

While he was watching his own body being absorbed into that hideous protoplasm, something snapped inside his brain.

Swept up in a torrent of madness, Inoue burst into a shrill, maniacal laugh.

Just then, the elevator doors on the floor opened, and his colleagues, who had been on a break, returned.

"What's with those guys? Why are they laughing?"

"Probably slacking off and watching TV."

The men, completely unaware, exchanged glances, just about to step right into the scene of a tragedy.

2

Around that time, in the CAI room at Jussei Academy, Nakajima was attempting to communicate with the devil Loki via the host computer connected to a modem-phone.

“Did the digital transfer experiment go well?”

“I suppose I could say we achieved some degree of success.”

A deep voice shook Nakajima through the speakers.

Trying not to let Loki know how frightened he was, Nakajima put on a calm front.

“You’ve finally been forced to acknowledge my skills, haven’t you?”

“If you want to think like that, go ahead. But let me tell you, it’s still far from perfect.”

“That’s unavoidable. When we send such a large amount of data over this shoddy phone line, some data corruption is inevitable.”

Nakajima said, gripping the voice input device. Beads of cold sweat glistened on his forehead.

Though his entire body was stiff with tension, Nakajima continued the conversation calmly with Loki, at least on the surface. However, in the back of his mind, he had a lingering sense of anxiety.

(What would happen if Loki were to gain the power to materialize?)

Nakajima asked himself, not knowing that Loki had already gained the power to materialize.

(No, that can’t possibly be true. After all, Loki is following the devil transport theory that I presented.)

The devil transport theory.

For not only Loki but all devils, possessing the ability to transport freely across the Earth had been a long-cherished dream.

Since the dawn of time, the spaces on Earth where devils could appear have been extremely limited. Moreover, once a devil had descended, it could only maintain its physical form within a radius of a few kilometers from its point of appearance.

It was the reason that the human world has been able to survive without being invaded by powerful devils.

Nakajima was attempting an experiment that would completely overturn this common knowledge. It was an experiment to transmit a devil—existing as artificial intelligence—to various computers via telephone lines.

However, with the poor telephone lines of that era, if they sent the massive amount of data required to construct a devil, errors were bound to happen. Reconstructing the transmitted data at the destination was also an extremely difficult task, and Nakajima had failed many times.

Therefore, this time, he was trying a method of sending the summoning program itself to the destination and summoning a devil there.

Loki had been quietly cooperating with the experiment so far. However, the issue of this experiment was that Nakajima had no way of knowing what was happening at the destination.

If Nakajima had known at that moment what kind of cruel incident had occurred at Mitsune Trading, he would likely have destroyed all the computer equipment he had used for the summoning experiment.

If Loki possessed enough intelligence to materialize himself…

Nakajima tried to dismiss the thought. However, his anxiety grew worse and worse.

(I need to summon another powerful devil capable of standing up to Loki. Could I make contact with other devils by adjusting the virtual horoscope?)

Just as Nakajima secretly considered opposing Loki, the speakers suddenly began to growl.

——Offer Yumiko Shirasagi to me.

——What?

——Offer Yumiko Shirasagi to me as a sacrifice.

——No way!

Nakajima cried out despite himself.

Even Nakajima himself was startled by how loud his own voice was.

——Youngster! Who the hell do you think you're talking to?

Loki let out a roar of anger like never before

——Wait. I got it.

Nakajima gave in to Loki's threats without a fight.

Frustrated with himself, he bit his lip until it bled. Just then, Yumiko's face—still retaining a touch of innocence—floated before his eyes, and once again, Nakajima was overcome by a vision.

Neither the rocks towering on both sides of the road, nor the somber sky registered in the young man's eyes.

His narrowed eyes were fixed solely on the path ahead.

His lips, parched and earth-colored, were caked with congealed, dark red blood.

His foot, pierced by a sharp fragment of rock, was swollen and purple.

But the thin, breathless gasp approaching from behind forced his wounded foot to move even faster.

"Izanagi, why won't you wait for me? Is it because I've become so ugly? When you entered the Land of the Dead, didn't you swear that no matter what form I took, you would bring me back? Was that a lie? If it were me, I would never run away, no matter what form you took."

"Forgive me…"

As if he were trying to escape his fear and guilt, the young man gritted his teeth and ran as fast as he could.

But the woman's relentless pursuit was gradually closing the gap between them.

Tears streamed from the woman's eyes, whose eyelids had rotted away, and trickled down her hair as she sobbed.

"Izanagi…"

When she screamed, the gash in her cheek widened, exposing her white teeth.

Soon the path came to an end, and as far as the young man's eyes could see, the land was covered in green grass.

"I've made it back. To this Toyo-ashihara…"

His wounded lips trembled with relief.

Spreading his arms wide, he drew the damp air deep into his lungs. Then, pressing his lips tightly, he turned around and sat down where he stood.

For a moment, the young man stared intently at the pitiful figure of the woman chasing after him. Eventually, he shook his head sadly and closed his eyes. Then, he began to concentrate his will.

Just as the woman came within a stone's throw, the young man's body floated slightly into the air, and the air shimmered with a wavy sound.

As if an invisible, colossal force had been unleashed, the earth trembled. Beneath the young man's feet, a crack opened and ripped through the surrounding rocky mountains. Countless boulders of all sizes began to tumble down toward the path.

Since she couldn't go any further, the woman stopped, just as a boulder as wide as two arms' width rolled down and blocked the path.

"Izanagi! I shall come to you. Even if it takes hundreds or thousands of years."

From beyond the billowing dust, the woman's anguished cry, mixed with sobs, could be heard.

"Forgive me, Izanami…"

The young man covered his ears with both hands and stumbled into a marshland where the reeds grew taller than himself.

A few minutes after Nakajima came to his senses and left the CAI room with a dejected air, a figure entered the room through the connecting corridor, as if she had been waiting for him to leave.

She turned on the PC's power switch, and the light from the screen illuminated her tense expression. As she typed a command, an intimidating, low voice rang out.

"Ohara. List the summoning programs Nakajima created. Can you operate them?"

“I believe so. If it’s just running them.”

“That’s enough. I don’t need any further technological innovations. As long as I can move freely and materialize, I can rule this world alone.”

“As you wish.”

The voice input device captured her trembling response.

Chapter Three: Possession

1

When people are faced with events that seem too surreal, they sometimes unconsciously try to avoid thinking about them. Alternatively, a psychological mechanism may kick in that attempts to rationalize the event in order to suppress anxiety.

Something similar happened to Yumiko, who had witnessed the summoning of the devil in the CAI room.

That night, Nakajima flatly stated that he had summoned the devil onto the computer.

But on reflection, there's no proof whatsoever that it was actually a devil. If he had had the skills to create a high-quality CG, he could easily have created a realistic CG like that.

Even regarding that demonic beast, she only caught a glimpse of it. It might be more natural to assume that she had simply encountered a large dog Nakajima had set for protection, and her fear added gruesome delusions to her perception of the dog.

While Nakajima may indeed be a genius computer geek, it's possible the whole thing was just a ritual staged by him and his inner circle. He might even be forming some kind of occult circle.

Yumiko, the only person in the world who realized the danger of what Nakajima was doing, had buried the anxiety she felt that night deep within her consciousness as the mundane days rolled by.

The select class at Jussei Academy was still by no means a comfortable place for her, but she had nonetheless managed to make a few friends she could talk to easily.

Even so, there was no denying that Nakajima held a special kind of power

within the school.

He had been holed up in the CAI room and rarely came to class.

When other classes were using the CAI room, he showed up. However, he paid no attention to the lectures, devoting himself instead to programming on his handheld computer.

Although many of her classmates had witnessed this, it seemed unnatural to Yumiko that no one said anything about it.

But even her close friends fell silent for some reason whenever Nakajima's name came up, quickly changing the subject.

However, it wasn't that they disliked him. It seemed a silence tinged with awe—a silence born of not knowing what words to choose to describe his overwhelming presence.

(Well, whatever. It has nothing to do with me anyway…)

Even though Yumiko tried to rationalize it in her head, every time she pictured Nakajima's profile, she couldn't help but feel her heart race.

It was a July morning, with summer vacation just around the corner.

The main street stretching from Kunitachi Station toward Hitotsubashi University was also Yumiko's route to school.

Walking beneath the row of ginkgo trees, which stretched their branches as far as they could against the blinding sunlight and spread their pale green leaves, Yumiko, her mind foggy from a lack of sleep, was thinking about the phone call she had received last night.

The call had come while Yumiko was helping cleanup after dinner.

Her mother, who happened to pick up the receiver, called out to her.

"Yumiko, it's a boy named Nakayama. Do you have a boyfriend already?"

"Nakayama…?"

Yumiko tilted her head, wondering if she had a classmate by that name, when it suddenly clicked.

"Oh, it must be the school phone tree."

The lie slipped out of her mouth instinctively.

Her heart began to race.

Trying not to let her mother notice her agitation, Yumiko waited a moment before slowly picking up the receiver.

“Hello, this is Yumiko.”

“……”

The caller didn’t say a word, but Yumiko could hear faint breathing coming from the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“You had better stay away from school tomorrow.”

Suddenly, a hushed voice whispered in Yumiko’s ear.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“You’re being targeted. Stay home.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Yumiko saw her mother stop washing the dishes, turning to stare at her with a suspicious look.

“Oh, I see. Then let’s talk more about it tomorrow.”

Yumiko said firmly, feigning calm.

After a brief pause, the phone went dead.

“What was that?”

Her mother asked, sounding worried.

“It’s nothing. It’s tough being so popular, isn’t it?”

At the time, she managed to brush it off with a vague reply, but…

A group of college students in blue jeans and T-shirts rushed past Yumiko, loudly discussing their summer vacation plans.

One of them, carrying a guitar case on his left shoulder, brushed against Yumiko’s arm.

“Oops, sorry.”

The student gave Yumiko, who looked up in surprise, a shy smile.

But Yumiko hardly noticed, her mind elsewhere.

(Was that really Nakajima on the phone?)

Yumiko asked herself the question.

There was no doubt about it. He had tried to disguise his voice, but that was definitely him.

But what was he trying to tell her?

His voice on the phone had been serious.

There was a sense of urgency, as if he were being chased by someone.

What had happened to him?

After that, she tried to do her prep work for today, but whenever she had tried to read through her textbook, Nakajima’s gaze would pop up between the lines, and she couldn’t get the content of the book into her head. It wasn’t just that she couldn’t study. She was so preoccupied with the phone call that she had hardly slept a wink last night.

Her head groggy from lack of sleep, Yumiko watched as members of the baseball team, finished with early morning practice, dashed past her while chatting loudly.

She turned left onto University Avenue and passed through the school gates. At that moment, an unbearable chill suddenly raced down her spine, and goosebumps rose on her arms.

Startled, Yumiko looked around. That was when she noticed Ohara watching her from the staff room window. Ohara’s eyes were infinitely deep and dark. Those pitch-black pupils, radiating an almost supernatural aura, were fixed intently upon her.

Drawn toward that gaze, Yumiko began to walk unsteadily toward her, when a male student on a bicycle gave her shoulder a light tap.

“Watch out, you shouldn’t daydream like that,” he said, before quickly riding away.

When she snapped back to her senses and looked at the staff room window again, Ohara was already gone.

With the school day about to begin, students running toward the building from the main street glanced suspiciously at Yumiko, who was standing there dazed.

“What am I doing? This isn’t like me.” she scolded herself, then broke into a run toward the school building.

2

Yumiko managed to dash into the classroom and take her seat just before the school bell finished ringing.

Ms. Ohara, who entered the classroom right after her, scanned the room with her usual composed expression.

Part of the reason that Yumiko was not on good terms with Ohara was because she had witnessed Ohara in a compromising position in the CAI room that night, but that was not the only reason. She had never gotten along well with this teacher even before that.

She kept her eyes down, trying as much as possible not to meet Ohara’s gaze.

After a while, Ohara instructed the students to enter the CAI room.

(Will we use the CAI room for a Japanese classical literature class? I wonder what on earth she’s planning to do.)

As far as Yumiko knew, the CAI system at Jussei Academy was supposed to be used only for math, science, and English classes.

What was she planning to use computers for in a Japanese classical literature class?

Ignoring Yumiko’s puzzled expression, her classmates quickly closed their books and began to leave their seats without even picking up their pens.

Yumiko scanned the classroom to see if Nakajima was there, but his desk was neatly tidied up, and it seemed he hadn’t arrived at school yet.

“You’re being targeted. Stay home.”

Suddenly, the voice from last night's phone call echoed deep in Yumiko's ears.

Cold sweat broke out on her temples, trickling down her neck to her chest, and the blood drained from her face.

"Hey, is something wrong?"

Confused and at a loss for what to do, Yumiko was snapped back to reality by the voice. She looked up to find her friend, Miyuki Kano, peering into her face.

Miyuki's large black eyes gleamed with mischief.

"Yumiko, I'm not letting you slack off."

"Stop it. I really don't feel well."

"Come on, let's go."

Miyuki, appearing strangely hyper, grabbed Yumiko's arm and practically dragged her to her feet.

Then Ohara approached her.

"Shirasagi-san, you look a bit pale. Why don't you go rest in the nurse's office?"

Her voice was laced with an excessive, almost performative kindness.

"She'll be fine, Sensei. I'm with her!"

With an exaggerated gesture, Miyuki patted Yumiko on the shoulder.

The other students filed out of the classroom, acting as if they noticed nothing.

Yet, Yumiko sensed an indescribable unnaturalness in this sequence of events.

(Everyone seems a bit different today.)

A chill ran down her spine.

Just then, Miyuki's grip on Yumiko's arm tightened.

"I'm okay, Miyuki. I can walk on my own now."

Despite her words, Yumiko's voice was trembling.

Determined to break free from Miyuki's grip and escape, Yumiko stepped out of the classroom, only to be surrounded by a waiting crowd of male students.

"Let's go," Takai urged. His eyes were swimming, just as they had been that night.

Before she knew it, Yumiko had been pulled into the center of the throng of her classmates.

Miyuki held fast to her arm. Her hand exerting a terrifying strength that was unimaginable given her slender frame.

"Please, let me go!" Yumiko tried to scream, but a handkerchief was stuffed into her mouth.

She struggled desperately to break away, but the students wouldn't allow it, marched her in an orderly fashion across the covered walkway.

As soon as the students entered the CAI room, Ohara quickly closed the door.

Click.

At the sound of the key turning, the students froze.

Finally released from Miyuki's grip, Yumiko looked around the room and let out a high-pitched, whistle-like scream.

(It's just like that night.)

The room was devoid of desks and chairs. Instead, Nakajima sat deep in a leather sofa placed right in the center.

A faint trace of pity flickered in his eyes as he gazed at Yumiko.

(Nakajima-kun, why…?)

Yumiko's lips trembled.

Nakajima met her gaze head-on, slowly rose to his feet, and pointed to the sofa where he had been sitting.

"Today, this is your reserved seat."

His heavy murmur pierced Yumiko's heart.

The events of that night rushed back vividly to her mind.

“No! I can’t stand this!”

Unable to remain standing, Yumiko collapsed onto the floor.

The countless fine scratches on the linoleum floor brought back that night with startling clarity.

That night, Nakajima had said he had sacrificed Ohara to the devil. Was that the truth? And was he now planning to sacrifice Yumiko, too?

With no way to escape or cry for help, Yumiko began to sob, her tears spilling onto the floor.

Then, a black enamel high heel stomped over the tears Yumiko had shed.

Timidly looking up, she saw Ohara looking down at her with an eerie smile.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Now, stand up.”

Ohara reached out a hand, her voice dripping with sweet coaxing.

“No! No!”

Yumiko shook her head violently, looking to Nakajima as if pleading for salvation.

“It can’t be helped. It’s already too late.”

Yumiko listened in despair to Nakajima’s voice, which sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

Nakajima’s narrowed eyes were fixed beyond the tempered glass, where the magnetic tapes of the host computer had begun to spin.

Synchronized with the rotation of the tapes, the screen of the monitor mounted in front shifted through a spectrum of vivid, kaleidoscopic colors.

“Right. Prepare the sacrifice.”

There was no longer any hesitation in Nakajima’s voice as he issued the command.

Yumiko saw several students approaching to seize her.

But in the next instant, a sudden tremor shook the earth, halting them in

their tracks.

“Wait!”

A heavy, visceral voice thundered.

“Loki, why do you stop it?”

Unprepared for this turn of events, Nakajima lost his composure. Cold sweat dampened his hand as he gripped the voice-input device.

“I don’t need your help anymore,” Loki declared.

“What?”

“Don’t you understand, Nakajima? I can already take on a physical form in this world by my own power.”

Before Nakajima’s wide, startled eyes, a blue mist began to seep across the surface of the screen reflecting Loki.

A dimensional rift connecting the devil realms and the human world was about to appear right then and there.

Shimmering with iridescent light like an aurora, space warped into strange curves, and a freezing chill accompanied by a pungent odor erupted from its depths.

Yumiko simply stood there with her mouth agape, staring at the spot where the mist was pouring out. Because the event was so utterly surreal, her sense of fear had gone numb.

Before long, the thickening blue mist began to take a faint shape, like a hologram.

Then, it slowly began to materialize.

The strands of light dancing in the chill from the dimensional rift transformed into flowing black hair, and the contours of a refined face took on bronze skin, staring down at the students with jet-black eyes.

” Yod, heh, vau, heh.”

The devil Loki, showing no fear of the true God, declared himself a god-like being through those ancient words.

Before anyone realized it, Ohara was kneeling at his feet with a reverent expression, joining in the chant as if worshiping an omnipotent deity.

(To think Loki had subverted Ohara to such an extent!)

Nakajima could do nothing but stare at Loki and Ohara, utterly helpless.

(I should have considered the possibility of this happening someday. In any case, I have to find his weakness as quickly as possible…)

Despite his agitation, Nakajima pointed the sensor connected to his computer at Loki, who had now almost fully materialized.

With trembling hands, he placed a call to the ISG host computer via modem and began transmitting the devil's form, as captured by the sensor, to the artificial intelligence "CRAFT."

Meanwhile, Loki fixed his gaze on Yumiko, who stood paralyzed with fear, and slowly reached out his hand.

His bronze-like naked body was as beautifully proportioned as the Apollo of Greek mythology, yet his brawny chest was densely covered in black scales.

Stared down at by jet-black eyes, from which no emotion could ever be discerned, Yumiko was held in a state of total paralysis.

"Come here."

Loki extended a hand tipped with sharp claws toward Yumiko, commanding her in a low voice.

Yumiko looked to Nakajima for help, but he merely spared her a fleeting glance, remaining entirely absorbed in his dialogue with the artificial intelligence.

Nakajima knew all too well that he stood no chance in a direct confrontation with Loki. However, he assumed Loki wouldn't dare lay a hand on him as long as he controlled the computer environment. He felt a desperate urge to uncover Loki's weakness while he still could.

Furthermore, Nakajima was confident that Loki would be unable to leave the magnetic field generated by the computer.

Yet, the moment Yumiko staggered as she tried to flee, Loki's arms began to dissolve with a distinct hissing sound, transforming into a flabby mass of jelly composed of pink protoplasm.

Several tentacles extended from its tip, wrapping around Yumiko's limbs like whips.

"No, stop it!"

The tentacles that had seized Yumiko's arms as she screamed dragged her closer and hoisted her up into the air.

Then new pink tentacles coiled around Yumiko, covering her entire body.

————Hurry up Craft!

Pushing Yumiko's screams to the back of his mind, Nakajima desperately kept typing.

Finally, the data transfer light began to flash, and a reply from Craft arrived.

——According to the data you sent, the gel-like substance consists of 58% water, 17% ectoplasm, and the remainder is extraterrestrial material, making it impossible to analyze its composition.

——Has a similar substance ever been discovered before?

——Yes. Since the beginning of this century, similar substances have been discovered in Mayan temples, New Hampshire, and other locations.

——What is its weakness?

——Due to insufficient data, I cannot formulate a hypothesis. However, reports indicate that the substance discovered beneath a relief in a Mayan temple evaporated after coming into contact with mercury sulfide paint possessed by the research team.

——Mercury sulfide? That's a compound of sulfur and mercury. But I don't have time to look for something like that. Tell me right now how to defeat it!

——Unfortunately, there is too little data to meet that request.

Furious at Craft's insistence on data, Nakajima slammed his fist down on the keyboard.

At that moment, a strange panting sound interrupted Nakajima's thought.

Turning around, he saw Ohara at Loki's feet, trembling with ecstasy as she clutched herself.

Nakajima noticed a glowing area, about the size of a fist, on Ohara's exposed chest.

Looking closer, he could see thin scales beginning to grow. Their color and shape were identical to those on Loki's chest.

Nakajima immediately reported this to Craft and asked what was happening.

——The woman is likely pregnant with the devil's child. Such cases have also been reported in Europe.

"That's impossible. It's true that Ohara and Loki shared a deep, private connection, but that was supposed to have stayed within the virtual realm. But what if…?"

Nakajima shuddered as he noticed a terrifying possibility. Perhaps Loki had already materialized multiple times, and he simply hadn't noticed.

Meanwhile, Loki's entire body was beginning to transform into something grotesque.

Except for the face, the skin across the rest of the body turned pink and began to take on a viscous quality, as if the very composition of the cells was changing.

"Aaah!"

Ohara let out a cry of intense emotion and clung to Loki.

Then, Loki's body began to squelch and writhing, absorbing Ohara into its mass.

Whether they were gods from the heights of Olympus or beings from the depths of the underworld, I is said that those who enter this mortal realm are often captivated by the grace and beauty of human women. Even a devil as dark as Loki seemed unable to resist the allure of the two women before him.

Loki's form had shifted into an eerie, otherworldly shape, with countless tendrils emerging from a singular mass, though his regal head remained unchanged. The pink protoplasm that formed Loki's body began to glow even more brightly. Yumiko, having lost the strength to resist, closed her eyes and let her head hang in silence. Slowly, she began to be drawn into Loki's eerie body.

However, Loki didn't notice that Ohara, who had already been overtaken by his mysterious power, was watching Yumiko with a gaze full of intense

emotion. It is said that once a female is touched by such dark forces, she may find herself inexplicably drawn to them, regardless of her former feelings. For Ohara, who was now entirely under Loki's influence, seeing her student being favored by him was an unbearable sight.

When Yumiko was absorbed into Loki's protoplasmic body up to her chest, Ohara—overwhelmed by a burning jealousy—wrapped her arms around Yumiko's neck and began to strangle her.

Yumiko grimaced in pain and writhed in agony.

"Stop! Stop it!"

Nakajima rushed forward with a grief-stricken cry, but a thick tentacle lashed across his cheek. Hurled against the wall, his vision went dark for a moment. By the time he managed to struggle back to his feet, Yumiko's body was devoid of life.

She was strangled by Ohara. Her head hung limp and tilted back. A film had already formed over her wide-open eyes.

The head of Loki, sprouting from the pillar of flesh, narrowed its eyes and glared down with displeasure at Ohara, who was within his body. Yet, it seemed the familiar person was more precious to him than Yumiko. Loki raised a tentacle and tossed Yumiko's body onto the floor with a dull thud.

Remorse raged through Nakajima's heart.

(Why didn't I warn her more seriously last night? If only I had told her everything instead of making that half-hearted phone call, Yumiko Shirasagi would never have met such a fate. I'm the one who killed her…)

He had never imagined that Loki would acquire the power to manifest in physical form, nor that Ohara would ever attempt to kill Yumiko.

But in fact, Loki had manifested his wicked physical form in this world and murdered the innocent Yumiko.

And Nakajima had stood by, watching helplessly as it happened.

Gritting his teeth, Nakajima suddenly looked up as a faint vermilion light caught the corner of his eye.

Loki's body had expanded throughout the entire CAI room, turning the classroom into what looked like a jungle of protoplasm.

Pink tentacles pulsed and writhed, attacking the hypnotized students one after another, absorbing and devouring them into his mass.

The vermilion light that had drawn Nakajima's attention lay beyond this hellish scene.

Near the classroom entrance, the space was stained a deep cinnabar, flickering like an aurora.

(The space is distorting. Is it another devil, different from Loki?)

But while he was distracted, several tentacles coiled around his legs.

"Loki, what do you think you're doing to me!?"

Nakajima was shaken to his core, never having imagined that Loki would turn on him.

"Did you assumed you were safe as long as you controlled the computer.

This woman can serve as your replacement quite well. Now that I can manifest in this world, your power is no longer necessary—in fact, you are merely in my way."

As if to confirm Loki's words, Ohara's laughter echoed from within his body.

Nakajima snatched up his handheld computer and frantically keyed in the command to summon Cerberus.

He didn't truly believe Cerberus could defeat the archdevil Loki, but he had no other choice.

A white mist began to rise from the liquid crystal screen.

"Go, Cerberus!"

As if responding to Nakajima's cry, the mist expanded rapidly, manifesting into physical form with startling speed, and lunged at Loki.

"A beast of the devil re, yet you side with a human?!"

Loki let out an earth-shaking roar, his fangs bared as he exhaled a breath like flames.

Deftly dodging the tentacles that lunged with a howling sound, the demonic beast Cerberus bit through their bases.

Loki's green blood dripped down, dissolving the linoleum floor.

The thunderous bellows of the two devils cracked the reinforced glass, sending parts of the ceiling and walls crumbling down.

Even as he fought fiercely against the beast, Loki refused to let go of Nakajima.

"Cerberus, over here!"

At Nakajima's shout, Cerberus jumped to save him, but a tentacle finally ensnared beast's torso.

Suddenly, Cerberus's tail split in two, becoming two rearing serpents that bit through the tentacles coiled around his body.

Freed, Cerberus lunged at the tentacles coiled around Nakajima in an attempt to save him.

Determined to prevent this, Loki writhed his tentacles, slamming Nakajima headfirst onto the floor.

The impact was enough to crack his skull. His consciousness flickered and his vision was dyed crimson by the blood streaming from his split forehead.

Through Nakajima's distorted vision, the sight of the raging Cerberus seemed to fade away, as if into a distant illusion.

(A pathetic end for a sorcerer…)

As he prepared for death with a fading mind, the memory of that strange vision suddenly resurfaced without rhyme or reason.

What on earth was that?

The woman had called the youth who looked exactly like him "Izanagi."

Did it have something to do with the legend of Izanagi and Izanami in Japanese mythology?

(But even if I knew now, what would it matter…)

Nakajima muttered despondently and closed his eyes, as if resigning himself to his fate.

At that time, without anyone noticing, Yumiko's heart—which should have

stopped beating entirely—began to pulsate faintly.

“Yumiko, Yumiko.”

She could hear a familiar voice calling her name.

“Who is it? Mom?”

Without even realizing it, Yumiko asked the question in her mind.

As if sensing that she had awakened, the voice paused briefly before speaking to her gently once more.

——Stand up, Yumiko.

Yumiko could hear neither the roar of the demon beast nor the sound of the classroom being destroyed. In fact, she wasn’t even aware of the terrible ordeal she had just endured. All she could hear was the woman’s voice.

Opening her eyes timidly, Yumiko realized the voice was coming from a vermilion aurora floating in the air.

Beyond that aurora, a pastoral landscape floated like a mirage.

Unripened green rice ears swayed in the breeze.. Rolling hills draped in summer grass. And there was, exuding a mysterious presence, a massive boulder.

Yumiko felt she had seen this landscape somewhere before.

(That’s the Ishibutai kofun in Asuka…)

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the woman’s voice spoke again.

——I’m Izanami. You are my vessel for reincarnation. It means you possess the body to receive my soul.

(Izanami? The goddess from the myths? Her vessel for reincarnation?)

The sheer suddenness of the claim left Yumiko bewildered. Yet, the voice carried a resonance of truth that brooked no defiance.

——Stand up, Yumiko. This airspace leads to Asuka, where I slumber. Bring Nakajima and come to me.

The moment she stood, urged by the voice, Loki’s furious bellow and

Cerberus's roar crashed into her ears, dragging her back to reality.

Overcome by intense dizziness, Yumiko collapsed into a crouch once more.

However, the moment she saw Nakajima lying there, blood pouring from his head, a fierce sense of duty surged within her.

(I must save him, no matter what!)

It was an emotion that transcended mere love or friendship. It was something closer to pure instinct. It was as if the boy, Akemi Nakajima, were a part of her own being—a feeling so intense that losing him might mean losing her very reason for living.

Even without a plan on how to save him, she gritted her teeth and forced herself to stand. Just then, she heard that voice again.

——For a brief moment, I will take over your body and bestow my power upon you. A power that can incinerate all things, if only you focus your gaze with intent. I pray that your body is strong enough to withstand this power."

As a brilliant flash of light flickered within the rift between dimensions, Yumiko felt a pure, bracing power welling up inside her—a sensation unlike anything she had ever known.

"Aaaaargh!"

A grisly scream snapped Akemi Nakajima back to reality.

Opening his eyes, he saw Loki's tentacles writhing overhead, giving off foul-smelling smoke.

Enduring a pain that felt as if his skull were splitting, Nakajima pushed himself up halfway.

Pillars of fire were erupting across Loki's body one after another, charring his flesh and sending reeking smoke into the air.

To his shock, Yumiko—whom he had thought dead—was standing against Loki. Wherever her gaze fell, a fresh pillar of flame burst forth. It was a power akin to pyrokinesis.

(What on earth is happening…)

Nakajima gazed at Yumiko in stunned disbelief as she wielded this unimaginable power.

But, before long, he noticed that her face was unnervingly pale and her entire body was trembling.

Yumiko's body, which had been channeling the immense power of Izanami through sheer willpower alone, was finally reaching its limit.

Meanwhile, Loki, consumed by the fire, ripped Ohara out of his own body and began chanting an incantation in a strange, rhythmic cadence.

Then, the pink protoplasm began to gradually coalesce, transforming back into the beautiful youth with bronze skin just as he had first appeared in this world.

Yumiko concentrated with all her might, trying to incinerate Loki with the power granted by Izanami. However, the flames did nothing more than scatter sparks against his bronze hide, having no effect at all.

Loki stared fixedly at Yumiko, making no move to leave, as if he were waiting for her to exhaust herself.

A wave of intense fatigue washed over her body, and her vision began to swim. Just as her knees were to buckle, she heard that voice again.

——Quickly, take Nakajima and flee.

Emboldened by the voice, Yumiko tried to rush to Nakajima's side, but her legs tangled and she fell.

Refusing to show any weakness, she immediately lifted her head and looked defiantly at Loki.

As Nakajima watched her desperate expression, something finally awakened within his despair-ridden heart.

Even though it was not his fault at all that he had been beaten up, he had resolved to summon a devil after that. From that day, a supple sensitivity that had been sealed deep within his heart was awakened, and a surge of affection unlike anything he had ever felt before welled up inside him.

(I can't afford to die… not for her sake, either…)

His mind, which had been as foggy and blurred as a mist, grew uncannily clear. Nakajima quickly scanned the room.

Before he knew it, Ohara was at the terminal keyboard, her eyes sharp as she hammered in commands. Her movements weren't as fluent as Nakajima's,

but her hands were well-accustomed to the computer.

When Nakajima realized that Ohara seemed to be saving the data that had changed due to Loki's materialization, he understood why Loki didn't want to leave the terminal. He still lacked complete confidence in his own materialization.

It was highly likely that the loathsome protoplasmic form was brought about by a chance program bug.

Loki had probably practiced manifesting in that form time and again. It seemed that he himself didn't know what would happen once he left the computer-generated magnetic field in his true form.

While he might gain true freedom, there was also the undeniable risk of vanishing.

That must be why Ohara was attempting to save all the data—just in case.

Nakajima, having seen through all of this in an instant, decided that now was his chance to escape.

As he swiftly operated his handheld computer to recall Cerberus, who lay as if dead after losing the battle, Loki noticed Nakajima's movement.

He could not let Nakajima—the only one who knew everything about him—escape, no matter what.

Knowing the risk, Loki stepped away from the computer and moved toward Nakajima.

"Nakajima-kun, look out!"

Yumiko scrambled to her feet in desperation.

Suddenly, her vision was stained crimson, and her consciousness faded. After that, her voice carried a regal authority that belonged to someone else entirely.

——Be gone, devil!

Izanami had taken control of Yumiko's body. Focusing her spiritual energy into her hands, Izanami unleashed a blast of power.

A pillar of fire erupted right on Loki's forehead—the one spot where his flesh lay exposed as he loomed before her.

As Loki recoiled with a beastlike cry, the Izanami-possessed Yumiko grabbed Nakajima and leaped toward the aurora.

Driven by a surge of fury, Loki let out a roar and lunged after them. For a split second, his form flickered like a heat haze, his bronze skin turning almost transparent.

Numbers raced frantically across the terminal monitor's screen. Ohara could do nothing but stare helplessly at it.

Yet, moments later, the host computer ceased its rampage, and Loki regained his physical solidity.

As the folds of the aurora swelled like fabric caught in the wind, Loki reached for them just before they could be enveloped.

His claws struck Yumiko from her neck down to her back, leaving a severe wound.

But the aurora swallowed the pair and rapidly began to fade.

In the space where the aurora had been, a trail of blood remained, vibrating to the malevolent voice of the now fully manifested Loki.

Chapter Four: Flight

1

Since last night, a drizzle had been falling over the Asuka region.

Mount Asuka-Ayakashi remained dark even at midday, as towering giant Japanese cedars blocked out the sunlight.

Since the distant Tenpyo era, a monkey-like stone statue had stood on the mountainside, its eyes—nearly half the size of its face—turned toward the void.

The rain falling before the statue began to turn a faint vermilion, swaying, though there was no wind.

Before long, a faint, aurora-like shimmer began to drift between the moss-covered trunks.

This was the mysterious phenomenon known to the people of Yamato as “Ayakashi,” from which the mountain took its name.

The aurora gradually thickened, hosting an untimely feast of light within the dim mountain forest.

Then, a sudden gust of wind disturbed the falling rain and set the aurora trembling, and two human-shaped shadows appeared in the air.

A moment later, the two shadows solidified into physical forms and tumbled into the undergrowth.

Just as it had appeared, the aurora slowly faded and vanished.

It started drizzling again, as if nothing had happened.

According to local legend, the gods of Yamato could travel freely to Tang China and Tenjiku (India) by mastering this “Ayakashi.” It was also said that

any human who wandered into it unknowingly would be “spirited away,” and thus must never approach.

Had Izanami harnessed that power to save the two of them?

Feeling the fresh breath of the trees and the cold drizzle against his cheeks, Nakajima opened his eyes.

Beside him lay Yumiko, nearly buried among the ferns.

(Where am I…?)

Gripping Yumiko’s hand, Nakajima scanned his surroundings warily.

The world he had glimpsed beyond the aurora had been a peaceful pastoral landscape, yet they now found themselves in the heart of a somber, blue-tinged forest.

Regardless, they had survived.

It was all due to Yumiko’s courage and that extraordinary power she possessed.

Nakajima gently touched her cheek, marveling at how such strength to repel the devil could dwell within such a delicate girl.

Yet, her skin felt unnaturally cold and rigid, as if she were a doll carved from ice.

Telling himself that her body was only frozen from the rain and the bitter cold, Nakajima took off his shirt and tried to lift Yumiko to dress her.

But as his hand brushed against her pale, delicate shoulder, it became smeared with dark red blood.

Trembling with dread, Nakajima peered at her back, stifling a scream that threatened to tear from his throat.

From her right shoulder to her waist, her white back had been savagely ripped open, exposing the bone beneath. Loki’s pursuing claws had inflicted this mortal wound upon her.

At that moment, Yumiko’s eyes fluttered open as if she were waking from a deep slumber.

She gazed at Nakajima with eyes so serene and pure they showed no trace of

pain.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

As Nakajima couldn’t find the words to respond that he pulled her into a tight embrace.

He was the one who should be apologizing. Hearing her say those words was far more painful than being blamed.

But there was a reason behind Yumiko’s words.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can hold on to life much longer. But tell me… would you wish for me to be reborn?” Yumiko whispered into Nakajima’s ear.

“What are you saying? You aren’t going to die from a wound like this! Stay with me!”

“No. Izanami told me so just now. It’s not just because of the wound on my back. I borrowed Izanami’s power to fight Loki… but her power was far too great for my current self to bear…”

“Izanami?”

Nakajima was stunned by the name that suddenly crossed her lips.

Having taught himself in magic and mythology, he could dimly grasp the weight of her words. At that moment, he realized the meaning behind the visions that had repeatedly haunted him.

This was the very reenactment of Japanese mythology, wasn’t it?

Izanagi, the father of the gods, had journeyed to Yomi, the land of the dead, to bring back his deceased wife, Izanami.

However, there he violated the taboo of looking upon Izanami’s rotting corpse. Because of that, he had no choice but to abandon his wife and flee back.

“Izanami said I am her vessel for reincarnation, and I possess the body to receive the soul of Izanami. I don’t understand what that means… But, Nakajima-kun, if you wish for me to live again, please carry my body deep into Izanami’s tomb, to the burial chamber where she sleeps. If you do, I will be revived, and this time, I can live together with you.”

As she said this, Yumiko coughed violently.

As her throat trembled, blood spilled onto Nakajima's hand.

"Yumiko, don't say such foolish things. You aren't going to die. You're going to live with me forever from now on."

At this blunt confession from Nakajima, who had never opened his heart to any female before, Yumiko smiled with a pale face.

"Thank you. Just like Izanagi in the myth, please don't abandon me halfway…"

Saying this, Yumiko breathed her last as if falling asleep.

Holding her body and stroking her hair, a flame of passion burned within Nakajima's heart.

Aside from that one vision, Izanami had never contacted him.

However, he believed Yumiko's words completely. Or rather, it might be better to say he decided to believe them.

After all, had he not already summoned Loki from Norse mythology?

He didn't know the true meaning of the "vessel for reincarnation" Yumiko spoke of. But in fact, Izanami had briefly revived Yumiko and given her incredible power.

"Wait for me. I will go to Izanami and surely bring you back to life."

Gently laying Yumiko's cold body down, Nakajima picked up the handheld computer that he dropped when he was transported to Asuka and switched it on.

He was relieved to see it working normally.

(If only I could at least summon Cerberus…)

He typed in the commands with a silent prayer.

When a white, mist-like substance rose from the small LCD screen, Nakajima let out a sigh of relief.

The beast manifested. Letting out a single roar, looked at his master with eyes like burning flames.

However, the wounds inflicted by Loki had robbed Cerberus of its usual vigor.

It even seemed as though its physical form had shrunk in size.

Healing such extensive injuries naturally would likely take months.

(Could I speed up the recovery by modifying the summoning program?)

(No!)

In the first place, he hadn't even figured out why only Cerberus could materialize so easily. He had treated devil summoning far too lightly. But it was too late for such regrets now.

Nakajima stroked Cerberus's massive jaws encouragingly, then he placed Yumiko on the beast's back and set off. After ten minutes of trekking along a narrow animal trail, the trees suddenly thinned out. Beyond a steep slope thick with bamboo grass, the landscape of a mountain village emerged, shrouded in a misty drizzle. To his front right there was a colossal stone tomb, while behind it rose a small mountain radiating a deep-green ethereal aura.

(That is Ishibutai and Mt. Tōnomine. Then… this must be Asuka!)

The scenery before him perfectly overlapped with the images in his mind—the ancient history photobooks he had pored over time and again with longing. It made sense that the goddess of ancient Japan would call them to Asuka, the very birthplace of mythology. But how was he to find Izanami's tomb without a single clue?

As Nakajima stood there dazed, the beast let out a low growl as if to urge him forward.

"I know, Cerberus. There's only one way…"

Taking a deep breath, Nakajima clenched his right fist and pressed his wrist against the beast's sharp fangs. A flash of acute pain shot through him, and fresh blood began to spill. To find Izanami's tomb, he was about to draw a magic circle—using his own blood to perform a spiritual vision.

But as the blood dripped onto the muddy ground, the rain washed it away, quickly distorting the patterns.

Despite his lightheadedness from blood loss, Nakajima patiently redrew the magic circle.

Though he had studied magical theory, he had always relied entirely on computers. This was his first time performing magic with nothing but his own body.

Yet, there was no hesitation in his expression.

He convinced himself. “If there had been even a single ambiguity, I couldn’t complete the devil summoning program. Since I accomplished that actual magic must be possible for me.”

After determining where he was now, seeing from the direction of Ishibutai and Mt. Tōnomine, Nakajima used an astrology app on his handheld computer to check the current alignment of the major planets and the moon’s phase, sketching them into the magic circle.

Once the circle was complete, he sat down in its center and murmured, “Izanami, please… tell me where you are.”

Nakajima formed a ritual hand seal and entered a state of meditation. Though he had never possessed any innate psychic abilities, his intense longing for Yumiko, combined with the unique magnetic field of Mt. Ayakashi, easily drew him into a deep trance.

In his mind’s eye, Nakajima envisioned the destiny connecting him to Yumiko as a silver thread. As he focused, the imagined thread began to glow with increasing brilliance.

Entering an even deeper level of meditation, he attempted to overlay this mental image of the silver thread onto the physical landscape. His face became etched with deep lines from the sheer intensity of his concentration. Eventually, he saw it clearly: the silver thread he had spun in his mind was being drawn toward two small hills whose slopes had been cultivated halfway up into vineyards.

“Is that Izanami’s burial place?”

Waking from his trance, Nakajima dropped to his knees and scanned the horizon, searching for the connection to his vision within the actual scenery.

And then he noticed that two hills were emerging faintly in the distance, forming an equilateral triangle with Ishibutai and Mt. Ayakashi, where he was standing.

“There! That’s it! That’s Izanami’s tomb!” he cried out.

Just then, as if catching the scent of blood, several flies began to swarm around Yumiko, landing on her wounds. Cursing under his breath, Nakajima brushed the flies away, gathered Yumiko into his arms, and mounted the back of Cerberus.

2

Around that time, in the CAI room of the now-ruined Jussei Academy, Ohara sat before the host computer, continuing her dialogue with Loki.

Even after he gained the ability to manifest in a complete physical form, Loki preferred to remain within the computer as digital data. Perhaps it was because his physical strain was minimal.

——Nakajima… it turns out he'd fled to Asuka.

——What are your orders? Shall I dispatch the students, or…?"

——No, I will go myself.

Loki's tone was filled with a powerful resolve.

Loki had realized that the devil summoning with a computer was a revolutionary technology, possessing power rivaling that of nuclear weapons.

If he could master the data-transfer methods Nakajima had devised, ruling this world single-handedly would no longer be a mere dream.

However, the same held true for other devils.

To prevent this technology from spreading to others and to establish absolute dominance over this world, he could not allow Nakajima to remain alive.

Loki had something that could be called a spy.

It was a fly.

Flies are among the few creatures capable of moving freely between the devil realms and this world. Loki possessed the ability to converse with all flies and experience everything they perceived on Earth as if it were his own.

At that very moment, through one of the flies, Loki learned that Nakajima had appeared in Asuka.

——Very well, then…”

Ohara entered a command into the computer.

What appeared on the screen—perhaps a list from Nakajima’s stored databases—was a list of phone numbers directly linked to the computers of city banks across the Kinki region.

Ohara scrolled through the screen, pulled up a map of Japan, and cross-referenced it with the numbers.

——I believe the Dai-Yon Kangyo Bank in Sakurai City would be most suitable.”

——Good. Then, proceed.”

As the magnetic tapes began to spin, the screen erupted into a wash of vivid, psychedelic colors.

Ohara set the modem phone and began slowly dialing the number for Dai-Yon Kangyo Bank, pressing each digit as if to verify them one by one. Then, the devil summoning program, designed to call forth Loki, was transmitted toward the bank.

3

Here in Asuka, hikers were hurrying along, their sneakers sinking into the gravel paths. Because of the unexpected rain, the tourists’ spirits seemed to have been damped.

Cerberus dashed like a gale up the path leading toward the hills, carrying Nakajima, who held Yumiko’s cold body in his arms. Though lacking its usual power due to injury, the beast’s majestic form was still graceful and fierce. Yet, the scene was so surreal that it failed to catch the attention of the hikers.

“What was that?”

“Probably filming a movie or something.”

The leisurely voices faded behind Nakajima.

Eventually, Cerberus reached the hill Nakajima had spotted. He did not know that this two-hundred-meter-long hill was an ancient burial mound known as Shirasagi-zuka. Despite its massive scale, Shirasagi-zuka was shrouded in

mystery. Not only were the occupant and the date of construction unknown, but it remained unclear whether it was a keyhole-shaped burial mound or a tomb built into a natural hill.

However, legends had long claimed that a woman was buried here. Among scholars of the Gishi-Wajinden, a Chinese historical record written about the ancient Japanese people, some argued that this was the true tomb of Himiko. Today, half of Shirasagi-zuka has been turned into farmland, with only the area around the stone burial chamber remaining as a thicket of bamboo grass and a pine forest.

As they climbed the hill, Cerberus's pace visibly slowed, his heavy panting vibrating against Nakajima's body. When the entrance of the kofun's horizontal stone chamber came into view, the beast finally came to a halt.

Nakajima hopped down to the ground while keeping Yumiko on the back of the beast. At that moment, as if the last thread of his endurance had snapped, Cerberus folded his front legs and collapsed onto the ground.

On Mt. Ayakashi, Nakajima had assumed that Cerberus's poor condition was simply due to his wounds from the battle with Loki worsening. However, his state of exhaustion was extraordinary. There might be something at Shirasagi-zuka that was tormenting the beast. As if unable to take another step, the beast lolled his tongue and let out a low growl.

The fiery glow had faded from his eyes.

"You did well. Return now, Cerberus."

Nakajima had no choice but to recall the digital beast into his handheld computer.

Around the same time, in the data processing room of the Dai-Yon Kangyo Bank's Sakurai branch, four female clerks were feeding that day's interbank transfer data into the host computer. None of them looked at their keyboards. Their eyes darted back and forth between the figures on the transfer slips and their terminal's screens as their fingers flew over the keys.

"Ugh, why is it always my terminal that breaks down!"

One of them stood up from her chair in frustration. Her name was Yoshie Mita. A second-year employee, she was a spirited young woman who suited her bob-cut hair—intelligent, though perhaps a bit short-tempered. Yoshie peered at the other clerks' monitors, but it seemed her terminal was indeed the only one acting up. The screen had gone completely black, and it refused

to accept any input from the keyboard.

“Maybe that happens when the host computer is sending data?”

Yuko Shimamura chimed in, glancing over while continuing her work with brisk efficiency. In both appearance and personality, Yuko was the polar opposite of Yoshie. She was Yoshie’s senior by one year.

“Is it only my monitor that’s acting up? Fine, then. I’ll go make some tea.”

Yoshie walked away, looking dissatisfied. Moments later, a pale blue mist began to seep from the surface of the monitor.

A pungent scent, resembling musk, started to drift through the room, but everyone was so engrossed in their work that no one noticed.

Behind the chair where Yoshie had been sitting, the blue mist gradually began to take physical form.

Perhaps tired from the data entry, Yuko stretched her arms toward the ceiling.

Suddenly, a jelly-like substance coiled around her white throat.

“Is that you, Yoshie? Stop fooling around.”

Yuko turned around with a yawn, only to find a grotesque, gelatinous pillar of flesh and the bronze face of Loki right before her eyes.

She tried to scream, but her tongue stiffened, and no sound came out.

As Loki tightened his tentacles, Yuko’s spine snapped with a sickening crunch.

Paralyzed with terror, the remaining two female employees were snatched up by Loki’s tentacles and pulled deep into his body.

From the doorway, the sound of a tray hitting the floor echoed through the room.

Returning with tea, Yoshie stood frozen as the surreal horror unfolded before her.

Loki’s tentacles swept toward her. A searing pain, as if pierced by a spear, shot through her chest, and a torrent of blood gushed out.

“What’s happening?”

A male employee, startled by the commotion while heading to the vault, threw open the door.

Loki mercilessly slammed Yoshie’s body against the man’s chest. The man was blown back against the wall by the impact. Desperately fumbling for the emergency alarm, he found the button, pressed it with every last ounce of his strength, and then lost consciousness.

The piercing wail of the alarm filled the bank.

Amidst the deafening noise, the figure of Loki gradually shifted into his cold, bronze form, his dark eyes now fixed in the direction Nakajima had fled.

Having returned Cerberus to his own realm via the handheld computer, Nakajima reached the Shirasagi-zuka stone chamber with Yumiko on his back.

However, as he pushed through the bamboo grass and peered inside, his face clouded with disappointment.

The entrance was about the size of half a tatami mat, and the interior was barely three tatami mats wide at most.

He couldn’t stand inside without hunching his back.

For the burial chamber of such a massive tumulus, it was far too small.

Was Izanami truly resting in a place like this?

Had his spiritual vision been mistaken?

(Don’t panic. There might be a hidden room, like in a pyramid.)

Nakajima thought, encouraging himself as he stepped down into the chamber.

The air inside was cold and stagnant, and the basalt walls were damp with moisture.

He gently lowered Yumiko from his back onto the floor.

A frog, which had been hiding in a corner watching the intruder, emerged and looked up at Nakajima with curiosity.

Nakajima sat on the stone floor and entered a state of meditation, seeking a point of connection with Izanami.

However, he was still inexperienced in such practices. Perhaps due to his growing impatience, no change occurred within his mental landscape. Time simply ticked away in vain.

Before long, a deep furrow formed between his brows.

“I can’t feel her. I should be much closer to Izanami’s embrace than before. Izanami, answer me. How can I reach you?”

As he pleaded in a raspy voice, a violent tremor struck the stone chamber as if in response.

The stones groaned, and dust rained down from the ceiling.

Choking on the debris, Nakajima found himself instinctively cradling Yumiko’s lifeless body.

“Izanami, please answer me! Help me bring Yumiko back to life!”

He muttered the words over and over, like a mantra.

When the earthquake finally subsided, the croaking of the frog suddenly grew louder, as if it were trying to tell Nakajima something.

Looking toward the sound, Nakajima realized a major shift had occurred in the stone chamber, and his eyes shone with excitement.

The tremors had created a gap between the floor stones, revealing the vermilion that had been painted on their sides. The vermilion paint used in Japanese kofun must be mercury sulfide.

Leaning closer, he could feel a cold draft flowing from the crevices along those red lines.

He wedged his fingers into a crack and used all his strength to try and move one of the floor stones. The stone came loose, revealing a hollow large enough for a person to enter.

The cavity sloped gently downward, leading deep into the bowels of the earth. Though shrouded in darkness, Nakajima did not hesitate.

Tearing his shirt, he bound Yumiko and the handheld computer to his body. He then crawled backward and lowered his feet into the hole.

The texture against his palms was as smooth as polished marble—a clear sign that this passage was of artificial origin.

Bracing his limbs to keep from sliding, and keeping his head up, Nakajima cautiously descended into the dark.

Meanwhile, Loki, who had appeared at Dai-Yon Kangyo Bank, had moved to the summit of Mt. Tōnomine. Below him stretched the rural landscape of Asuka, dotted here and there with mysterious megaliths.

With the misty rain hitting his face, Loki wrenched his mouth wide open.

His throat swelled unnaturally, and his lips trembled violently.

The ultra-high-frequency sound emitted from his throat was beyond the reach of human hearing.

Yet, drawn by that sound, black specks the size of rice grains pierced through the rain from all over Asuka, flying toward him.

It was a swarm of flies—Loki's familiars.

The gathered flies caressed Loki's face affectionately with their hairy legs, and then they dropped into his ear canals to whisper their reports.

Once Loki had gathered the information he needed, he commanded, "Go!" and the flies returned to their respective posts.

Placing a hand over the wound on his forehead, Loki stared toward Shirasagi-zuka.

(That Nakajima! What is he planning, being in a place like that…)

No, he knew it wasn't Nakajima's power that had brought the two of them to Asuka.

Nor was it the power of Yumiko Shirasagi.

There was no way a mere human woman could possess the power to wound a devil as powerful as Loki.

Most likely, a Japanese god or demon had possessed her and summoned the two of them here. And it had to be a being of considerable strength.

"I don't care who did it. I will show no mercy. I'll crush them," he muttered.

Then, Loki charged down the steep slope, heading straight for Shirasagi-zuka.

Chapter Five: The Sword of Fire

1

The cave continued endlessly, tracing a gentle downward slope.

Nakajima kept backing down slowly, bracing his limbs against the walls to support his weight.

The sound of his labored breathing echoed off the smooth rock, fading away toward the entrance far above.

The reverberation felt like the faint breath of Yumiko, whom Nakajima carried on his back. Time and again, he would stop in his tracks to check on her.

Yet, it was not that she had returned to life. There was no sign of vitality in her cold body. They merely gave off a faint, lingering scent of death.

Even so, Nakajima did not lose heart.

However, he had already lost all sense of time.

The cave was so long it felt as if it might lead to the very center of the Earth.

His limbs, supporting the weight of himself and Yumiko, were numb. If he let his guard down for even a moment, he felt he would slip and fall.

Nakajima twisted his body and cast off his shoes and socks.

Being barefoot helped his feet grip the rocks more securely than before.

If he were alone, he might have simply slid down the slope.

But if he were to damage Yumiko's body, all this struggle would be for nothing.

Then, without warning, his foot kicked empty air.

“Ah!”

He reached out desperately, but he caught nothing but the void.

He fell straight down for two or three meters. Because he had instinctively moved to protect Yumiko’s body, his shoulders and back took the brunt of the impact. Nakajima could not even stir, slipping into unconsciousness.

There was a faint light, along with a slow, steady drift of air.

Feeling a cold breeze brush against his cheek, Nakajima forced his heavy eyelids open. A short distance away, Yumiko’s body lay still. Surprisingly, his own body felt light and there was no sign of broken bones. The pain was manageable. Bracing himself, Nakajima stood up and took a deep breath.

As his eyes adjusted, his surroundings came into focus.

What a surreal sight it was.

Nakajima stood in a clearing nestled between towering cliffs. The rock faces were stained a deep vermilion. About three meters up one wall, a dark opening gaped like a mouth—likely the cave he had just fallen from. As they were in the depths of the earth, there should have been a ceiling above, yet the vermilion rocks rose as vertical precipices until they were swallowed by a hazy darkness.

Beyond the clearing, a narrow path stretched toward the bottomless gloom.

Was this the passage leading to Izanami’s burial chamber?

Nakajima crossed the clearing and drew closer to the entrance of the path.

Unlike the cave from before, this was a completely subterranean canyon formed by nature.

The faint phosphorescence illuminating this underground space seemed to be emitted by moss-like plants growing on the rock walls.

Nakajima recalled the scenery of the valley from that vision—the one the young man had sprinted through while being chased by the woman with a rotting body.

A drop of viscous water struck his cheek with a plop.

As Nakajima looked up, water droplets were trickling down from the far heights of the cliff and wetting the ground. The water might have contained

lime. Here and there along the path stood stalagmites that had formed over an unfathomable stretch of time.

Nakajima reached out and touched the surface of the towering cliff.

The cold rock was damp to the touch.

When he dug his nails in, the damp, softened surface easily peeled away, revealing a fresh layer of vermilion.

As he remembered that the vermilion pigment used in Japanese tumuli is mostly mercury sulfide, Craft's words came rushing back to him.

The substance found in the ancient Mayan temple, believed to be part of a devil's body, had reportedly evaporated after being doused with the mercury sulfide pigment the expedition team possessed.

In other words, this tumulus was designed with measures to prevent the intrusion of devils and demons. That was why Cerberus had been in such agony. However, it meant that Loki would be unable to enter this place as well.

Heartened by this realization, Nakajima hoisted Yumiko's cold body onto his back once more and began walking deeper into the vermilion canyon.

However, he wasn't exactly the athletic type.

In less than ten minutes, his steps began to falter.

Yet, he could not afford to rely on Cerberus's help.

Gasping for breath, Nakajima pressed on through the burial chamber's passage.

Sweat trickled down his forehead into his eyes, blurring his vision and making it all he could do just to steady his footing.

As he shook his head to clear the sweat, a white figure flickered in the corner of his eye.

"Who's there!"

Nakajima cried out.

But there was no answer. Looking closer, he realized there was more than just one or two figures.

None of them showed any sign of movement. They stood silently or lay huddled in the shadows.

As he approached with trepidation, he saw an adipocere-encrusted mummy tilting its head, its black sockets staring blankly into the void.

Whether by the power of mercury sulfide or the frigid air of the underground, the corpses had been preserved by some natural embalming process.

Each bore a large, gaping hole in the chest, as if it had been punched through by something with human-like hands.

A quick survey revealed about a dozen mummies scattered in total disorder.

Judging by their attire, the corpses spanned various eras. Some wore crude tunics, others were medieval samurai in eboshi caps, and some appeared to be peasants from the Edo period.

Most bore grisly marks.

It was unlikely that anyone would stumble into such a place by accident. They were likely grave robbers who had broken in to plunder the tumulus. But who—or what—could have reduced them to this state?

Just then, a bizarre cry rang out.

“Iä! Rrlryeh!”

The voice seemed to echo from far away.

Inside the passage, where sounds echoed in complex patterns, it was impossible to determine where the scream had originated.

Nakajima cast a sidelong glance at the mummified remains of those who had been brutally slaughtered.

If the tomb guardian, who had mercilessly struck down those who sought to desecrate this grave, still haunted this place…

As a shudder rippled through him, the thing suddenly loomed out from behind a rock directly before his eyes.

“Yomotsu Shikome!”

Before he knew it, he had called out the name of the monster.

The monstrous woman was the spitting image of the one that had appeared in the visions of Izanagi and Izanami he saw in the CAI room. That was why he had uttered her name without thinking. However, actually facing the creature, a chill of terror surged from the very core of his being.

She stood nearly twice his height.

Her short, purple-mottled legs shimmered with a pale, slimy luster. Her lower abdomen was swollen like that of a pregnant woman.

The simple tunic she wore—a mere token of clothing—did nothing to conceal her breasts, which sagged down to her navel.

Her long, webbed hands swung aimlessly at her sides.

Her face was grotesque, like a big green frog.

With every breath, the gill-like slits on either side of her jaw widened, revealing pulsating pink ridges of flesh within.

The fact that her long hair shone with a sleek, glossy sheen only added to the sickening dread.

Yomotsu Shikome took a step toward him.

Keeping his eyes locked on the monstrous woman, Nakajima gently laid Yumiko down. He wiped the cold sweat from his palms onto his trousers and reached for his handheld computer.

He hesitated, but there was no one left to rely on but Cerberus.

“Cerberus, please… come forth!”

However, the white mist rising from the LCD screen vanished with a faint, weak howl before it could even take shape.

Was the mercury sulfide in this vermilion canyon sealing the beast’s power?

As Nakajima stood frozen, Yomotsu Shikome swung down her webbed hand toward his shoulder.

He leaped aside but lost his footing and stumbled.

By the time he desperately regained his balance, a slimy hand had already seized him and hoisted him into the air.

Yomotsu-shikome licked all around her mouth with her big, long tongue, and her foul, fishy breath brushed against Nakajima's face.

"Izanami! I've come this far—are you really going to abandon me now?!" Nakajima screamed instinctively.

At that moment, the monstrous woman's demeanor shifted. She just looked blank. Then, she stared at Nakajima.

The murderous intent had vanished.

Her eyes rolled toward Yumiko's lifeless body lying in the passage.

Instantly, a look of profound awe spread across the Shikome's face.

"I… za… na… mi…"

Her throat trembled as she chanted the name, as if in worship.

Watching her movements, it was clear that the goddess of myth and Yumiko looked remarkably alike. There had to be a connection between them that Nakajima didn't yet understand.

The creature set him down, scrambled awkwardly toward Yumiko, and gently lifted her cold body, cradling her as if she were made of the most fragile glass.

"Wait! What are you going to do with Yumiko?"

Glancing back at the shouting Nakajima with a look of reproach, the Yomotsu-Shikome jerked her chin as if telling him to follow, and began walking deeper down the path while still holding Yumiko in her arms.

2

Meanwhile, Loki, who had appeared at the Dai-Yon Kangyo Bank, located the Shirasagi-zuka burial mound with ease. He soon stood before the entrance of the cavern within the stone chamber—the very one Nakajima had entered.

"Wait for me, Nakajima. Soon, I shall defile and devour your precious woman right before your eyes."

With a twisted smile, Loki transformed his body into a shapeless mass of flesh and slithered effortlessly into the cave.

The cavern that had taken Nakajima hours to descend was traversed by the fleshy mass in a matter of minutes.

However, the moment the fleshy mass tumbled onto the stones of the underground plaza with a heavy thud, its mucous membrane began to sizzle, emitting smoke as it started to dissolve.

“Curse you!”

Loki swiftly shifted his form into a bronze physique, dropping to one knee upon the rock as he let out a resentful growl.

In his protoplasmic flesh, he likely could not have withstood the chemical changes wrought by the mercury sulfide.

Only the space between his eyebrows—the sole spot where mucous membrane remained—throbbed violently.

Clenching his teeth, Loki stood up, his eyes fixed on the vermilion path with an unprecedented severity.

3

Meanwhile, Nakajima, guided by Yomotsu-shikome, had finally reached the end of the narrow path.

Before him, the burial chamber lay gaping open.

This was undoubtedly the tomb of Izanami he had been searching for.

(I finally made it…)

There was no door to the chamber, but on the floor near the entrance, a single relief glowed with a silvery fluorescence, radiating a spiritual aura as if guarding the tomb.

The relief resembled the Hexagram of Solomon.

Yomotsu-Shikome gestured with her chin, prompting Nakajima to move forward.

She then gently placed Yumiko onto Nakajima’s back as he prepared to step inside.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

When Nakajima called out, the Yomotsu-shikome shook her head, her face clouded with what seemed like pure awe or dread. Then, without warning, she thrust her long arm into her own mouth, all the way up to the elbow.

Her green neck pulsed and bulged as she began to retch violently.

A sour, foul stench rose from the spot, forcing Nakajima to turn his face away.

Yomotsu-shikome picked up two orbs emitting a blue light from within the vomit and held them out toward Nakajima.

Reluctant as he was, Nakajima couldn’t very well ignore the monstrous woman’s gesture, so he grimaced and accepted them. The two orbs, coated in slime, were unexpectedly light and fit perfectly in his hands.

“What are these?”

When Nakajima asked, yomotsu-shikome used her webbed hands to mimic the motion of striking the two orbs together.

“I’m supposed to strike them like this?”

As he tentatively touched the two orbs together, a small spark flew. Yomotsu-shikome nodded repeatedly, her mouth half-open and her eyes narrowed.

(Did she just… smile?)

Nakajima began to feel a sense of kinship with this strange woman.

At that moment, a sound like a human scream drifted from beyond the path they had just traveled, accompanied by a lingering echo.

Yomotsu-shikome trembled violently and began to retrace her steps along the path, looking back repeatedly as if reluctant to leave.

Nakajima crouched low, careful not to let Yumiko slide off his back, and wiped the two orbs Yomotsu-shikome had given him against his trousers before striking them together with force this time.

Bright orange sparks flew in all directions.

However, beyond that, nothing particularly unusual seemed to happen.

(Are these used for a ritual or something?)

Without finding an answer, Nakajima tucked the two orbs into his pocket and stepped over the relief.

A faint fragrance of flowers drifted within the burial chamber.

The room was by no means spacious. It seemed no larger than Nakajima's bedroom.

Large jars, reaching as high as Nakajima's waist, were crowded along the walls.

As Nakajima peered into one of the jars, the floral scent grew stronger and he found oil pooled at the bottom.

It was likely perfumed oil offered to Izanami.

At the center of the room, there was a platform of white granite.

Upon that platform, the ashes had piled up in the shape of a person lying on his or her back.

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4

Meanwhile, Yomotsu-shikome, who had delivered Nakajima to the burial chamber, sensed a presence and was hurrying back.

It was uncertain whether Yomotsu-shikome, who didn't usually show much emotion, thought, "It's a busy day because of the intruders!" but it was indeed the first time in millennia that this peaceful tumulus had received two sets of visitors in a single day.

Before long, she encountered Loki dashing down the path and blocked his way, spreading her webbed hands as wide as she could.

"Rrlryeh."

She attempted to convey something in a tongue from another world. Yomotsu-shikome sensed that this opponent was entirely different from Nakajima, who was a human being. He was a being of extraordinary power.

If it was possible, she wanted to drive him away without a fight.

Loki stopped moving, too. He was narrowing his jet-black eyes as if to size up the strength of the opponent he had suddenly encountered.

Soon, a faint, mocking smile played on his lips, and he began to walk forward with total composure.

A fist flew at the shoulder of Yomotsu Shikome who was blocking his path—a strike so swift it was nearly invisible to the eye.

Before letting out a cry, she was slammed against the rock wall, her purple-mottled legs thrashing wildly against the stone at her feet.

“Do you truly believe someone of your caliber could stop me?”

Loki sneered toward Yomotsu-Shikome, as she finally got back on her feet.

Regaining her senses, she lunged at him with a menacing shriek.

Yet, Loki didn’t even bother to dodge. He caught her mid-assault, seized one of her arms, and swung her through the air with terrifying force.

In an instant, Yomotsu-Shikome’s arm was torn away from the elbow down, and fresh blood sprayed across the ground.

Realizing that she was utterly outmatched in strength, Yomotsu-Shikome threw herself forward, attempting to crush Loki under her overwhelming weight.

Caught off guard, Loki fell with her.

Though she tried to strike at his throat, her fangs failed to leave even a scratch on his bronze-like skin, emitting nothing but a dry, hollow clicking sound.

Loki tore through Yomotsu-Shikome’s chest with his bare hands and ripped out her heart. He tossed her aside as she screamed in agony, hurrying on as if nothing had happened.

“Izanami… Izanami…”

Her sorrowful cries eventually faded, becoming no more than a faint stir in the air.

5

Meanwhile, Nakajima had reached the burial chamber but he was at a loss, as he had no idea how to contact Izanami.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine. Scanning his surroundings without knowing what had happened, he saw Loki peering in from the entrance of the chamber.

Nakajima stood frozen, unable to even let out a cry. The vermilion of the passageway, which had been so decisive against Cerberus, had failed to repel Loki.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe,” Loki said, his arms folded nonchalantly, his voice carrying a threatening tone. Yet, there was a faint trace of irritation in it.

Shielding Yumiko’s cold body behind him, Nakajima kept a wary eye on Loki’s every move.

If Loki intended to, he could easily dispose of Nakajima at that moment. But why wouldn’t he step inside the chamber?

Eventually, Nakajima’s eyes were drawn to the silver relief embedded in the entrance.

Was that hexagram the thing forbidding Loki from entering this room? He could think of no other explanation.

“If that’s the case, I must never leave this place. No matter what happens, I have to stand my ground right here.”

As if reading the shift in Nakajima’s heart, Loki spoke in a honeyed, gentle and persuasive tone.

“Nakajima, do not fear me. If you bond with me once more, you could even make the human world your own.”

“Shut up. You tried to kill me. Besides, it’s not that I wanted to run away from you. I’ve come this far to bring Yumiko back to life, no matter what it takes. Don’t get in my way.”

“Bring this girl back to life? If that is your wish, why not ask me? Granting you the Art of Soul-Calling would be a simple matter.”

The Art of Soul-Calling was a forbidden magic for resurrecting the dead. However, it was said that while this secret technique could revive the body, it was impossible to bring back the soul.

“The Art of Soul-Calling? Are you planning to replace Yumiko’s pure soul with the soul of a demon?”

“Pure, you say?”

Loki sneered, his pitch-black eyes widening as if to overwhelm Nakajima.

“Unfitting words for a man who has already shaken hands with a devil. Look into my eyes.”

An irresistible power was woven into that voice.

Unable to look away, Nakajima stared into those eyes and gasped at the gruesome scene reflected deep within Loki’s pupils.

People caught in devil’s tentacles, their heads torn off.

Eyeballs melting away.

Fresh blood overflowing.

Hiroyuki Kondo, Kyoko Takamizawa, and women he didn’t know—all staring at Nakajima with eyes full of curses.

He could practically hear their screams.

“Nakajima, look closely. This is all supposed to be what you desired. After all, it was none other than you who summoned me into this world.”

Loki’s raucous laughter violently shook Nakajima’s soul.

Yet, the faint scent of flowers drifting in the air barely sustained Nakajima’s crumbling spirit.

“At the very least, I must bring Yumiko back to life.”

“Without the Art of Resurrection, how can a mere human expect to revive the dead?”

“It’s true, I can do nothing on my own. But the spirit of Izanami is here…” Nakajima said, as if convincing himself.

“Absurd,” Loki sneered, baring his fangs.

However, his lips twisted unnaturally. Despite being covered by bronze skin, the vermilion was undoubtedly beginning to corrode the demon’s flesh.

“Fine, then. If that corpse is so precious to you, feel free to dally with it to your heart’s content.”

Loki’s laughter eventually turned into a roar of suppressed rage. His jet-black eyes turned toward Yumiko’s cold body with pure hatred.

In an instant, white vapor began to rise from the body, and the overwhelming stench of decay hit Nakajima’s nostrils.

“Stop it!”

Nakajima rushed to Yumiko and held her tight, trying to shield her from Loki’s gaze.

But as Nakajima lifted Yumiko in his arms, the skin on her neck began to peel away. A foul stench of decay filled the air as blood and bodily fluids clung to his palms. Unable to withstand the sheer terror, Nakajima let go of her body. Her head hit the floor, twisting at an impossible angle, and her eyeballs spilled out onto the floor, trailing threads of blood.

Her nose crumbled away, and her hair, still attached to the scalp, fell to the floor with a heavy thud. White teeth peeked through lips split open like a ripe pomegranate. Nakajima, standing frozen in a daze, witnessed an even more terrifying sight: Yumiko’s hand was beginning to move slowly.

Drenched in a cold sweat, Nakajima backed away.

“Why are you doing this to me? Please, let it end.”

Finally, Yumiko stood up by her own strength.

“Please… let me be at peace…”

Whispering those fractured, indistinct words, Yumiko closed in on Nakajima.

Making no effort to avoid the jar, Yumiko knocked it over. It shattered, and the fragrant oil within the jar began to spill out as she closed the distance.

A hand, its flesh sloughing away to reveal bare bone, reached out to seize him.

Nakajima, having lost all reason, frantically shook off her hand and fled through the burial chamber.

Slowly, Yumiko pressed on—steadily, as if reeling in an invisible thread that bound the two of them together.

No matter how hideously she had transformed, he could never bring himself to hurt her. Driven into the deepest corner of the chamber and left with no other choice, Nakajima grabbed a handful of the ash piled upon the granite pedestal before him and hurled it at her.

Such a gesture did not stop her. However, some of the ash fell onto the oil that had leaked from the jar. Then, despite the lack of any wind, the ash rose into the air once more and began to take shape like a holographic image.

The moment Yumiko's hand reached Nakajima's throat, her body was suddenly enveloped in a flash of vermilion light.

As if Loki's sorcery had finally been broken, Yumiko's cold body lost all strength and collapsed onto the floor.

"I am glad you have come, Nakajima."

At the sound of that soft voice, Nakajima finally snapped back to his senses.

A woman who looked exactly like Yumiko was gazing intently at him with a gentle look in her eyes.

Her milky-white skin, which veiled her divinity, emitted a faint phosphorescence, and her amber eyes held a sparkle of wisdom and fertility clearly distinct from that of a human.

"Lady Izanami…"

Instinctively, Nakajima was down on one knee.

With a nod, the goddess slowly turned toward Loki.

"Demon, return to your own realm."

Her voice was dignified and firm.

Loki sneered, but a hint of bewilderment flickered in his eyes.

"You appear to be a deity of this land, but why do you favor these mortals so much?"

“Because this girl is my vessel for reincarnation.”

“Vessel for reincarnation? A strange thing to say. You exist right there, separate from her, don’t you?”

“_____”

Izanami did not answer, but kept her gaze fixed on Loki in a cold stare.

Loki responded by spreading his arms wide in an exaggerated gesture.

“It matters not either way. If you dote on that girl so much, you may have her. In exchange, the man is mine. Joining forces with me would be no loss for him. I, too, wish to avoid unnecessary strife.”

Watching their interaction in breathless silence, Nakajima was seized by the fear that Izanami would forsake him.

However, a smile from Izanami quickly put him at ease.

“In all likelihood, you simply fear Nakajima’s wisdom being snatched away by another demon.”

As she spoke, Izanami narrowed her eyes and glared intensely at Loki’s chest.

A flash of red light exploded against his bronze chest, sending Loki staggering back.

It was a power of pyrokinesis incomparable to when she had possessed Yumiko.

“So, that is your answer!”

His hair bristling with rage, Loki stood at the entrance of the burial chamber and glared back at Izanami.

Yet, try as he might, he seemed unable to step across the silver relief on the floor.

On the other hand, Izanami was also unable to deal a decisive blow to Loki.

But as they stood locked in a stalemate, the goddess’s expression suddenly clouded over.

It was then that Nakajima noticed a faint, white silhouette floating within Loki’s jet-black eyes.

(That is…)

Loki's pupils didn't reflect Izanami who was standing before him, but her former self—the one who had turned into a hideous corpse and yet continued to pursue the man she loved.

"Behold, Izanami."

Loki's low voice pierced the goddess's chest.

"My eyes can reflect, like a mirror, the terror lurking within your heart. The more you gaze into them, the more you shall tremble at your own fear. How hideous it is… I can hardly believe that this is your true form."

As if to strike a final blow, another figure was reflected in Loki's eyes.

It was Izanagi who was cowering in dread as the grotesque Izanami clung to him.

"Abandoned by your own husband because of your ugliness! How pathetic."

"Cowardly…"

Beside herself with humiliation, Izanami was stepping toward Loki as if drawn by an invisible force.

"No, Izanami! If you step out of the burial chamber, you'll be playing right into Loki's hands!"

At Nakajima's cry, Izanami barely managed to hold her ground at the entrance of the burial chamber.

However, Loki's left hand was beginning to move with a strange, rhythmic motion.

By the time Nakajima realized it was a sorcery used to manipulate a corpse, it was already too late.

Pushed from behind by Yumiko's reanimated remains, Izanami was caught off guard and involuntarily took a step out of the chamber.

To avoid her gaze—which held spiritual power—Loki swept her legs, pulling her down onto her stomach and wrenching her right arm behind her back.

"You're a big talker. You think you can best me? A mere woman?"

Only the parts of Loki's body touching Izanami began to transform from bronze into a pinkish protoplasm.

"Goddess of this land, I shall make you bear the child of a devil."

A foul stench polluted the pure spiritual air as that loathsome protoplasm slowly began to envelop Izanami's body. Izanami looked toward Nakajima as if pleading for salvation. But what could Nakajima, who stood unarmed, do against a devil that had so easily overpowered even a goddess?

Pinning his last hopes on a single chance, Nakajima typed a command into his handheld computer. Though the manifestation had failed in the vermilion passageway, the spiritual aura of the burial chamber might act as a catalyst for Cerberus to regain its true power.

As if sensing Nakajima's desperate wish, Cerberus materialized. With a roar that shook the entire chamber, the beast crouched, ready and waiting for its master's command.

"Cerberus, save Izanami!"

Nakajima commanded.

The outcome was clear even before the fight began. Even at his absolute best, Cerberus was no match for Loki—that had already been proven during the battle at Jussei Academy.

What's more, the beast was now wounded and utterly exhausted.

Nevertheless, Cerberus lunged at Loki with fearless determination.

Instinctively, the beast seemed to realized that this terrifying enemy's sole weakness lay in the protoplasmic section of his forehead.

Evading Loki's grasping hands, Cerberus relentlessly repeated his assault: raking Loki's forehead with powerful forepaws, leaping away, and springing back into the fray once more.

Loki, who was using one hand to pin Izanami down, was finding Cerberus to be a far more persistent nuisance than he had anticipated.

"Loki isn't paying any attention to me right now. If I could catch him off guard and aim for that wound on his forehead, I might just be able to save Izanami. If I only had something I could use as a weapon," he thought.

Just then, Izanami screamed.

He whipped around in a panic to see her pinned by Loki. Yet, her eyes showed no sign of agony. Instead, they were fixed intently on Nakajima, secretly trying to convey a message.

(What are you trying to say?)

Nakajima almost stepped out toward Izanami.

Izanami glared at him as if in warning and screamed, “The fire, quickly!”

For a split second, Loki was distracted by her words and looked toward Nakajima, but Cerberus clawed his forehead, forcing his attention back immediately.

(Fire…!)

Like a divine revelation, Nakajima remembered the two jewels the Yomotsu-Shikome had given him.

With a prayer in his heart, he struck them together.

Twice, three times—only pale blue sparks flew, and nothing happened.

“What does Izanami want me to do?”

His palms grew damp with frustration.

Yet, as he struck the jewels together one last time in near desperation, a spark finally caught the aromatic oil on the floor and erupted into flame.

Instantly, the flames roared to life, mysteriously tracing a circle in mid-air. The center of the pale blue fire, edged in orange, soon shifted into the likeness of a human face, flickering as if it had its own will.

(Hino-kagutsuchi…)

The fire god Hino-kagutsuchi, said to have been given birth to by Izanami just before her death.

Though no one had told him, Nakajima knew the name. He himself didn’t know why.

Driven by a primal urge, Nakajima reached his right hand toward the center of the pale blue fire.

With a vortex of air reminiscent of a tornado, the fire of Hino-kagutsuchi

spiraled, coiling itself around his hand.

Nakajima bit his lip, enduring the heat. It was not the pain of skin being scorched by fire, but a deeper agony—as if the very flesh and blood in contact with the flames were boiling, radiating heat from within.

Then, a blinding flash of light erupted from Nakajima's flame-shrouded hand. The radiance was so intense that even Loki and Cerberus, locked in their struggle, froze for a fleeting instant.

Wincing at the blinding light, Nakajima shut his eyes. When he opened his eyes once more, his hand was already gripping a sword emitting a vermilion phosphorescence.

A surge of immense power, unlike anything he had ever felt before, coursed through his entire body. Without a moment's hesitation, he dashed out of the burial chamber.

Loki felt a momentary flash of fear when he saw the sword, which radiated an intense spiritual energy unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Then returning to himself, Loki tried to shake off Cerberus. But the beast's fangs were sunk into his hand and his face was left completely unguarded.

Nakajima struck with all his might. Loki reflexively released Izanami to shield his forehead, but the blade severed his right arm and—with a heavy, solid impact—plunged perfectly into his brow.

"GYAAAH!"

A blood-curdling scream shook the rock walls of the ancient tomb. Clutching his forehead with the sword still embedded in it, Loki staggered to his feet.

But he couldn't move forward.

His bronze-hued body began to undergo a rapid change. Rotting with a sickening odor, his skin fell away in pieces, and the blade embedded in his flesh tumbled to the ground. Loki's whole body was becoming a squelching, rippling heap of raw protoplasm.

As Nakajima stood there in a daze, a part of the protoplasmic mass before him began to throb violently.

Suddenly, a green heart—as if possessed by a life of its own—burst through the protoplasm and escaped onto the stone floor.

It began to trace strange, grotesque patterns with the green blood oozing from it. As it did, space itself began to warp around the floor where the patterns were drawn.

“Loki is trying to shift to his own realm. Nakajima, do not let the demon escape!”

Snapped back to his senses by Izanami’s voice, Nakajima snatched up the sword of Hino-kagutsuchi and plunged it into Loki’s heart just as it was vanishing into the distortion of space.

Then, the heart shattered like a burst balloon. The protoplasmic mass ceased its pulsing.

A flash of stillness—then, in the next instant, a roar that shook the very foundations of the subterranean cavern crashed over Nakajima. Vermilion rocks rained down from the murky heights of the ceiling.

Still clutching his sword, Nakajima scrambled across the trembling floor, crawling into the burial chamber. Jars overturned one after another, spilling fragrant oils. A gentle scent of flowers, utterly out of place in this hellscape, filled the chamber.

“Yumiko…”

As Nakajima crawled toward Yumiko’s lifeless body lying at the entrance of the grave, he lost consciousness before he knew it.

Chapter Six: Final Chapter

Nakajima, who had been dozing against the wall, woke to find a pleasant weight and a precious warmth in his arms.

Thump… Thump…

A faint but steady pulse vibrated through his body.

(I want to stay like this a little longer.)

Shaking off the sentiment, Nakajima slowly lifted his eyelids.

He realized that he was holding Yumiko tight in both arms.

A fresh, sweet-and-sour fragrance wafted from her body.

“Yumiko…”

Nakajima tried calling her name, his voice trembling with hesitation.

Yumiko did not respond, her breath coming in quiet, steady rhythms. She had truly been reborn.

Her mouth, which had once been torn open like a pomegranate, was now perfectly formed, her slightly parted lips quivering faintly with every breath. Her well-shaped eyelids were adorably full, and her cheeks were tinged with a faint pink.

A pure, serene presence gently enveloped his racing heart.

“Rest assured. Yumiko will wake soon.”

Turning around, he saw Izanami standing there.

Though her hair was disheveled and matted with splattered green blood, her radiantly beautiful face was filled with a kindness that soothed Nakajima’s soul. However…

“I will be taking charge of this girl for a while.”

Nakajima was bewildered by the goddess's unexpected words. To reassure him, Izanami continued gently.

"I have no intention of tearing you two apart. However, as she is now, this girl will not be able to endure the battles against the devils and demons. I wish to draw out more of her power. Until then, you must be patient."

"Battles against devils? But isn't Loki dead?"

As Izanami looked at the puzzled Nakajima, her eyes took on a strange brilliance.

The goddess drew near, took Nakajima's hand, and gazed intently into his eyes.

Suddenly, a white light flashed, and all color vanished from his vision.

Izanami revealed the reality in a voice filled with sorrow.

"Look, Nakajima. At this sight…"

As Izanami's fingers gripped Nakajima's hand, a vivid image emerged within the murky white space.

In the CAI room of Jussei Academy, Ohara was desperately pleading with the terminal.

"Loki, why won't you answer me?"

Ohara, clutching the voice input device toward the silent computer, was trembling.

Over and over, she cycled the power, attempting to run the devil-summoning program.

But the magnetic tapes of the host computer remained stubbornly still.

Only the hum of the cooling fans disturbed the silence of the room.

"Urgh…"

Ohara doubled over, clutching her lower abdomen.

The color drained from her face.

Upon the white nape of her neck, scales had begun to sprout—it was clear

proof that she now carried the devil's seed.

"Be still…" she whispered, as if soothing the new life lurking within her.

Then, as if to mock her as she continued to strike the keys with a prayer-like intensity, the magnetic tapes began to spin with a fitful, clattering sound.

"Loki… is that you?"

Ohara's eyes gleamed with delight.

Her grip tightened around the voice input device.

"I was worried about you, Lord Loki!"

As Ohara spoke, the magnetic tape slowed its rotation as if hesitating.

When Ohara tilted his head in suspicion, a low, raspy voice echoed from the speaker.

"I am Set. Are you the one calling me?"

"Set? I am looking for my Lord Loki. Loki, please answer me quickly. Where are you?"

Ohara's hysterical voice rang through the CAI room.

"My name is Set. To call upon another's name… how insolent!"

The moment a soul-shaking, terrifying voice rang out, Izanami let go. Nakajima's vision snapped, and in its place, a dim, murky space unfolded before his eyes.

Sweat broke out on his temples and trickled down his neck.

"Set? You mean the strongest evil god of Egyptian legend!"

Nakajima's voice was trembling.

"It's not just Set. Many devils and demons have noticed the passage you opened to other Realms, and their ambitions to conquer the human world are growing. There are other devils aiming to win you over to their side…"

Izanami's voice carried a solemn, majestic weight.

Nakajima tightly closed his eyes as if to shake off his hesitation, and then he spoke.

“I brought this all upon myself. It must be my mission to close the gateway to devil realm with my own hands.”

“Well said.”

The Goddess nodded, and her expression seemed to soften ever so slightly.

“Though it may be painful, the day will surely come when you are rewarded. As I cannot descend into the mortal world, I cannot fight by your side. Instead, I shall send Hinokagutsuchi to you. He is a god who will become a sword of flame and grant you great power in times of need. His spiritual energy, which stands out even among the gods of Yamato, will surely be of help to you.”

It seemed Izanami no longer intended to appear in the mortal world by possessing Yumiko. This could be taken as a declaration of that intent.

Nakajima felt he had to ask the question that had been growing in his mind.

“Lady Izanami, you said that Yumiko is your reincarnation. What exactly did you mean by that?”

The Goddess met Nakajima’s gaze head-on.

“What do you think is the purpose of reincarnation?”

When she asked him, Nakajima was at a loss for an answer. It was something he had never even considered.

Izanami nodded and continued her explanation.

“That is understandable. You may not even believe in the concept of reincarnation itself. But assuming it exists, will you listen to what I have to say?”

Moved by her gentle words, Nakajima nodded instinctively.

“A soul is born within a physical body, departs from it upon death, and then enters another. Through this repetition, it grows. This is what people call ‘reincarnation.’ However, a soul cannot inhabit just any body. It can only dwell within a vessel that possesses identical traits.”

“Identical traits… Then, Yumiko is…”

Izanami gave a deep nod and went on.

“However, many of us, the gods of Yamato, exist outside this cycle of reincarnation.”

“Outside the cycle?”

“Yes. We have ceased the growth of our souls and remain in Yomi or Takamagahara. I am one of them. But this was not solely by our own will…”

She began to say something more but caught herself and closed her lips. Closing her eyes to compose herself, she spoke again.

“On the other hand, in the earthly realm, a physical body capable of housing one of us is born at a fixed probability. Yumiko is the vessel born into this world for the first time in millennia who can contain me. We call such a person a ‘Vessel for Reincarnation’.”

Nakajima felt as though he had finally caught a glimpse of the mystery behind the word ‘reincarnation.’ But then…

“But if that’s true… what about me?”

“You are the Vessel for the soul of the god Izanagi. Never before have the two of us appeared in our reincarnated forms in the same place at the same time…”

Izanami swallowed the words she was about to speak. Unaware of the goddess’s true feelings, Nakajima pressed her impatiently.

“Then, will I be able to meet the god Izanagi someday?”

“I do not know. I have not seen Izanagi since that day. He returned to the surface, laid the foundation for the prosperity of the people of Yamato, and then, after yielding his throne to the next generation, vanished into the unknown. Some gods disappeared as if to follow him, but no one knows his whereabouts.”

It was an unexpected conclusion to the myth. Contemplating the hearts of Izanami, who stood before him, and Izanagi, whose very location was a mystery, Nakajima cast his eyes down in silence.

Then, the goddess gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I shall bestow my power upon this girl. And when she is able to protect herself, I will return her to you. You will wait until then, won’t you?”

Without waiting for an answer, Izanami turned her back to him.

Trailing a wake of light, she slowly ascended the granite pedestal and looked back at Nakajima one last time.

“Soon, my messenger will come to collect your precious one. Until then, cherish this fleeting reunion.”

Leaving behind a faint smile, Izanami quietly lay down upon the stone.

As her form dissolved into the air, a thin layer of ash in the shape of a human remained on the pedestal.

“Izanami…”

Nakajima instinctively reached out for the goddess’s fading shadow, but a familiar voice called him back.

“Nakajima-kun, you kept your promise, didn’t you?”

He turned to find Yumiko’s amber eyes gazing at him with boundless tenderness.

She threw her slender, innocent frame against Nakajima’s chest like a surge of raw emotion.